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Tan: Our country's issues are more complex than right and left

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Many Americans feel the country is headed in the wrong direction. An October 2021 **NBC poll** put the figure at 71%. The ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan, Congressional dysfunction, and COVID's unwillingness to JUST. STAY. DOWN. How do we make sense of where the country is at the moment?

People on the right tell themselves a story in which they are the only patriots who love this country. They believe they are saving the country from socialists who will spend us into penury and acquiesce to Communist China. They fear their enemies will burn down the cities and open borders. Many long for a time in the past when the country was united and prosperous.

But, slow down. People on the left tell themselves stories, too. They believe their enemies are at least inverately racist and at the very best supremely misled. Foes are tools of big business (contributing to alarming climate change) and hateful to POC (people of color), including immigrants. And, by the way, that mystical long ago wasn't so great. It masked domination by white, **cisgendered,** heterosexual men.

We use these stories, or frames, to make sense of new information we hear. Part of the story on the right is that Democrats want to give people money for nothing. This lens helps them make sense of new phenomena they encounter. So, the shortage of employees at your local fast-casual restaurant is explained by payments made as part of the COVID stimulus that made people not want to work.

On the left, where rapacious big business is part of the story, the absence of employees at the self-same restaurant is explained by people using the opportunities provided by the sizzling job market to escape abuse in underpaid jobs.

The truth is that, as with many complex phenomena, the causes of the employee shortage are manifold. In the US, more than **4.5 million people left** their jobs in November 2021, building on millions more throughout 2021. That is a Great Resignation!

Looking at causes, government payments did make it easier for some employees to be choosy. But, the hot job market also enabled people to leave jobs that were just plain "meh" instead of downright exploitative.

COVID's peaks and troughs have contributed too; loss of jobs has been especially acute in in-person, poorly paid fields like accommodation and food service. **The number of day care workers** is down over the pandemic. Lack of day care has made it hard for parents to get back in the labor force, whatever their motivation about work.

There are also longer-term trends at work. **Goldman Sachs says 1.5 million workers retired early** and likely won't be rejoining the labor market. Research from the libertarian CATO institute says that we're short, too, of 1.2 million immigrants because of Trump-era policies and the pandemic.

All these factors have contributed to the shortage of workers at that fast-casual restaurant, so our frames on both left and right missed quite a lot. Interestingly, the workers shortage is manifesting globally, so this should cause us to regard warily any U.S.-only policy explanations.

As I explained the stories above, did you notice that the me in each story is always the good guy? I'm the one standing up for old-fashioned American values of hard work (on the right). I'm the one trying to save lives because I'm against abortion (also right), pro-mask mandates (on the left) or fighting climate change (also left). We are often the heroes of the stories we tell ourselves.

These stories in which we privilege ourselves and never listen to the other side or drill down for more complex answers are contributing to the division in the country today. Our separate stories

are contributing to why so many of us see the country headed in the wrong direction. We can't wait for any president, candidate, or official to solve the problem for us. We have to start to change, each one of us.

So, I challenge all of us in the new year to do something hard.

Discover **a new source of news** that doesn't automatically feed into your existing worldview.

Uncover the complexity behind socio-economic and political phenomena.

Find new stories to tell yourself in the new year. Make them stories in which you are one American who loves their country among many others, even on the other side, who do too. Don't insist you are the only hero in the story.

It's going to take heroes on both sides to get this country going in the right direction.