

## **Guest commentary: Want unity? Tame the pandemic, and I don't mean COVID**

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In a joke illuminating our divided times, a husband suspects his wife is deaf and decides to test her hearing. While she's cooking, he stands afar asking, "what's for dinner?" Hearing no response, he moves progressively closer, continuously questioning until right behind her. "What's for dinner?" he repeats, to which his wife testily replies, "for the fifth time, meatloaf!"

Often, we think others are deaf when we're the ones with the hearing problem – a syndrome reaching pandemic proportions in our increasingly polarized "I'm right, you're wrong" culture, catching dissidents-turned-heretics of varying persuasions in a thought-police dragnet.

Believe you're immune to this contagion? Think Again. Humans crave inclusion and approval, finding it in social media's echo chambers where one can turn a "deaf ear" to information disconfirming their bias, and be "all ears" to whatever confirms it.

I call this "curated tribalism," and it's infecting the greatest continuing experiment in human history – the American Idea that people with differing beliefs, values and ethnicities could forge a freer and fairer nation. As contagion spreads, trust in civil society's indispensable institutions – media, academia, and our justice and electoral systems – is evaporating.

Though not perfect, our system protects the weakest, most unorthodox voices, challenging odiousness with better, clarifying speech. Can this society-enhancing system withstand today's cancel culture and Big Tech's censorship?

Considering that "cancel" was 2020's third most-used word – behind COVID and pandemic – it's revealing that 62 percent of Americans self-censor to avoid reputation and career-ending consequences, Cato Institute's survey found. That doesn't include social media's purging of undesirables, consolidating the conformity surveillance state.

If you've ever been unfairly judged and stifled, you know the percolating frustration. To appreciate the brewing powder keg, multiply by tens of millions of "heretics" whose pent-up resentments can't vent.

If "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function," as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, cancel culture renders us deaf and dumb.

Let's apply Fitzgerald's test to today's vexing conflicts, going beyond approved narratives to appreciate the larger context:

- People vulnerable to COVID-19 must be protected. Shouldn't we also protect people vulnerable to COVID lockdowns?

- George Floyd’s senseless killing was unjust. Wasn’t the ensuing violence that destabilized communities and victimized innocents also unjust? Isn’t equality under the law the antidote to racism?
- Despite efforts to upend the election, the Electoral College worked, and presidential power transferred peacefully. That said, Harvard’s Electoral Integrity Project reported that U.S. elections from 2012 through 2018 rated “lower than any other long-established democracies and affluent societies,” and 55 percent of Americans surveyed by Hill/HarrisX in 2020 believed the upcoming election would “be rigged.” So, shouldn’t we enact reforms to restore trust in the electoral system, and those elected by it?
- The desperate, foolish and lawless Capitol Hill rioters must be prosecuted. Shouldn’t we also try to address the disenfranchisement and grievances felt by 70 percent of Americans who believe “our political system seems to only be working for insiders with money and power,” according to a 2019 NBC/WSJ poll?

Hashing out differences in this thoughtful way doesn’t feed the outrage beast created by the fusion of media, big tech and politicians — they accumulate too much money and power by exploiting divisions.

During prior divisive times, leaders helped advance the American Idea by encouraging “charity for all and malice for none” (Abraham Lincoln), and to “learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools” (Martin Luther King Jr).

So, unplug from the parrot-like press and social media memes and mobs destroying our moral consensus. Find free and heterodox thinkers who inform and inspire. Have conversations with people who think differently, always practicing the Golden Rule while questioning, listening and searching for common ground.

Think Again — if we listen to understand rather than reply, might we become a wiser and more united country where silence is truly golden, not deafening?

*Melanie Sturm, founder of [Engage to Win](#), aims to change communication for good through her training and writing. Encouraging readers to Think Again, you might change your mind, she welcomes comments at [melanie@engage2win.org](mailto:melanie@engage2win.org).*