

OPINIONS

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THE LAKELAND TIMES ... OUR VIEW

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Giving thanks for our opponents

Each year we take this week to give thanks to both the small and big things in life, and, most of all, to give thanks for life itself, and to the future that lays before us. We give thanks not only for what we have, the people and things in our lives, but for the sources of good will and joy that populate our days even when our efforts fail and dreams fall short.

We do so as well this year.

But we also want to step just a bit outside the lines and especially offer thanks this year to those who disagree with us, politically and otherwise. That may sound a bit strange, but, the truth is, from a societal standpoint, that's the most important thanks there is to give this Thanksgiving, in which the age is polarized and the country fractured.

Because giving thanks to our opponents means that there are opponents to give thanks to. It means we live in a democracy, which is defined by point and counterpoint, by thesis and antithesis, by majoritarian thought and the protection of dissident and minority opinion. It means we live in a place where we are allowed to live at all, that is to say, to live and think freely.

We can all debate the health of this democracy, but let's save that for another day and just savor that we in fact still have a democracy this Thanksgiving, as tattered and in ill health as it may or may not be.

We still vote, and the outcomes of elections still surprise us. We are still free to write our opinions in the pages of this newspaper, and citizens are still free to disagree with us on all sorts of platforms, including in the pages of this newspaper.

Our opponents are what democracy is all about. Democracy means nothing if it lacks disagreements. Political leaders are ghosts without challengers before them. Disagreement and opposition are what push progress, compel evidence-gathering, ignite innovation, and lead to social, cultural, and economic advances.

To be sure, in a healthy society, there is always, or at least usually, on any given topic, a consensus. That allows a nation to consolidate its progress and to reap the gains of its debates.

But even consensus needs a stiff wind blowing against it if democracy is to survive and progress continue. Without debate, without challenge, without free speech, consensus is nothing more than a steady boat on a calm sea with no wind or engine to propel it.

That might seem peaceful but in time it becomes a prison, for consensus always ends up sitting dead in the water unless there is someone to rock the boat, to unsettle the waters and the air, and to sail it to shore.

In the history of our nation, we have been blessed with

healthy conflict. While that conflict has sometimes turned ugly — the price we must pay for allowing ideas to engage in battle through debate — it has often ended, fittingly enough, in uplifting idealism and hard-won but tangible gains in human freedom.

This year, things on the democratic front seem noticeably grim. A new authoritarianism has settled in, and the language of censorship has seeped into the vocabulary all along the political spectrum. That's troubling because language is so easily and so often translated into action.

But, in this Thanksgiving week, let us be reminded that the health of democracy — precisely because it is a democracy — ebbs and flows like the tide. Some years it is stronger than others, but it is always resilient, as long as we choose to keep swimming with its currents.

To be sure, this is not the darkest period of our history when it comes to authoritarianism. Everybody has their favorite era they believe was the most oppressive, but ours is the tenure of President Woodrow Wilson during the first World War.

The years 1917-1920 were dark indeed as true fascism descended upon the nation. In those years, there was intense anti-German sentiment — just as now there is intense anti-Russian sentiment — following the U.S. entry into World War I. As journalism scholar Adam Hochschild reminded us not too many years ago, censorship and discrimination were rampant.

"Schools, colleges and universities abruptly stopped teaching the 'Kaiser's tongue,'" he wrote. "Iowa forbade the use of German in public. In Shawnee, Okla., a crowd burned German books to mark the Fourth of July. Berlin, Iowa, changed its name to Lincoln. Chicago's Bismarck Hotel became the Hotel Randolph. Families named Schmidt became Smith."

In Washington, D.C., Hochschild wrote, when a man failed to stand up as "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played, a sailor behind him shot him dead. Congress also passed the Espionage Act, which has recently emerged again as a tool by which the government suppresses dissent by criminalizing it.

According to Hochschild, Wilson's special emissary to Russia, Elihu Root, said in 1917 that "there are men walking about the streets of this city tonight who ought to be taken out at sunrise tomorrow and shot for treason ... There are some newspapers published in this city every day the editors of which deserve conviction and execution for treason."

And, indeed, Hochschild wrote, at least 75 newspapers and periodicals either had specific issues banned or were

forced to close entirely.

We are not in that situation yet, though the similarities are too apparent. But even in that heavy-handed time, when, like today, federal agents were prone to mounting early-morning raids on political opponents, the currents of democracy ultimately rushed back in because opposing voices rose up to ride with the inevitable tide, and to stand above the surf in their quest for freedom. Civil liberties were not only saved, they advanced in ensuing years.

So things could be and have been worse, and we should give thanks for that. We should also give thanks for the history we can still read, to understand the mistakes we must avoid.

But most of all, let's just give thanks to opposing voices. Let us give thanks that we can still hear them today, and may we pray they become louder still. For when opposing voices can no longer be heard, you and I will no longer be able to be heard. Our voices, too, will be silenced.

That's the thing about censorship. History teaches us that, sooner or later, it comes for everybody.

This Thanksgiving week, the tide of liberty is ebbing. Our voices and freedoms are fading out to sea, and we must work hard to make sure we can rise up and ride those waves when the tide returns, as the behavioral order of the political universe demands that it will.

Our resilience is being tested, but we can keep our voices — and our democracy — strong as long as we remember that our own opinions will become static and sterile without other strong opinions to oppose them.

So this Thanksgiving, we give thanks to those who disagree with us, especially those who do so vehemently and passionately. We give thanks not for left or right, not for liberal or conservative, not for Democrats or Republicans. We give thanks for dissent itself.

We shall surely marshal the loudest chorus that we can against disagreeable viewpoints; we shall organize the thunder and lightning of our dissent and noncompliance. But we shall fight to the death, if necessary, to defend people's right to oppose us, even their right to say that we should be silenced.

Within that oppositional dynamic is both the fragility of democracy and its resilience. Within it is both its vulnerability and inspiration. Within it is both democracy's contradiction and its unifying force, its Achilles heel and humanity's greatest strength.

Within dissent and protest is the essence of meaningful human life, and, this Thanksgiving, we give thanks for it, and to everyone, free thinkers all, in our communities and nation.

Only Biden can stop this political dumpster fire redux

Grover Cleveland beat Benjamin Harrison in 1884. The same men faced off in 1888, with the opposite result. A second rematch took place in 1892, and Cleveland was re-

stored. If you died in 1892, you didn't miss a thing during your first four years of death.

What could be drearier or more

indicative of calcified politics, save for four consecutive terms of FDR?

Since Joe Biden's milquetoast Democratism basically make him Hillary Clinton not-in-a-pantsuit, we now face the dreadful possibility of a third Donald Trump run and a second Biden run that feels like his third. This could be a presidential campaign between two eldercoots we would have been better off never having seen run for, much less achieve, control of the executive branch in the first place. *And it could happen all over again.*

A Trump v. Biden rematch, of course, is the exact opposite of what we want.

Two years from now, on Election Day 2024, Trump will be 78 and Biden will be nearly 82. Nancy Pelosi will be 84. There's nothing wrong with old age per se — wisdom, experience, blah blah blah — but Biden, 78 at the time, didn't have the energy to run a full-fledged campaign *last* time. What is he going to do when he's 82, campaign from someplace even more convenient than the basement of his house? Will he Zoom in from bed?

A nation with this many octogenarians at its helm feels more like the Soviet Union during the bitter-end pre-collapse 1980s (Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko all died in short order) or Zimbabwe at its most wildly dysfunctional at the conclusion of Robert Mugabe's endless reign. A country doesn't have to be governed by millennials to be vi-

brant or successful. Too many young people in charge can lead to disaster — look at Twitter before Elon Musk swept in. Still, a repeat contest between two incredibly old

white guys is algorithmically engineered to generate a tsunami of apathy.

Nobody needs this retread.

Well, Trump

needs it; he thinks prosecutors will be reluctant to indict him for one of the myriad crimes he has committed now that he is a declared candidate for president, and he is right. But two-thirds of the voters, to the extent that they matter anymore, don't want Trump to run again. Here, finally, we find bipartisan common ground: Two-thirds of Americans *also* don't want Biden to run again!

True, they are different two-thirdses. But there's overlap. Millions of Americans sing in perfect harmony that they want something or someone or two someones different. That has to count for something — even if it will take a week or two to tally in Arizona. A nation cries as one: Don't run, baby, don't run!

Like all politicians, Joe Biden says a lot of things that aren't true. Unlike things that people actually want, like abortion rights and student loan forgiveness that he lies about, Biden is almost certainly lying when he says he's running again. And most Americans believe and hope that he's lying about that.

But he may be telling the truth.

Insanely. Democrats lost the midterms. But they beat the point spread, so they're declaring victory. Even as Biden goes from a Democratic House and Senate to a Republican House and Democratic Senate, he is upgrading his report card like a kid using a pencil to change a D to a B. After such a magnificent, pyrrhic vic-

See **Rall**. . . page 16



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