

Published on: February 17, 2016
STATE OF THE UNION

The Seven Habits of Highly Depolarizing People

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How to make friends and influence people on the other side of the aisle.

I didn't vote for him but he's my President, and I hope he does a good job.

—John Wayne (b. 1907) on the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960

I hope he fails.

—Rush Limbaugh (b. 1951) on the election of Barack Obama in 2008

In recent decades, we Americans have become highly practiced in the skills and mental habits of demonizing our political opponents. All our instruments agree that we currently do political polarization very well, and researchers tell us that we're getting better at it all the time.

For example, Stanford Professor Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues recently found that, when it comes both to trusting other people with your money and evaluating the scholarship applications of high school seniors, Americans today are less friendly to people in the other political party than we are to people of a different race. The researchers conclude that “Americans increasingly dislike people and groups on the other side of the political divide and face no social repercussions for the open expression of these attitudes.” As a result, today “the level of partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial animus.”¹ That's saying something!

But if polarization is all around us, familiar as an old coat, what about its opposite? What would *depolarization* look and sound like? Would we know it if we saw it, in others or in ourselves? Perhaps most importantly, what are the mental habits that encourage it?

We're confronted with an irony here. We Americans didn't necessarily think our way into political polarization, but we'll likely have to think our way out. A number of big structural and social trends—including the end of the Cold War, the rising importance of cultural issues in our politics, growing secularization, greater racial and ethnic diversity, the shift from the Greatest Generation to Baby Boomers as the nation's dominant elites, the break-up of the old media system, the increasing ideological coherence of both of our two main political parties, among others—appear to have helped produce our current predicament.

Yet over time, the intellectual habits encouraged by these underlying shifts developed a life and autonomy of their own. They became “baked in,” ultimately forming a new popular wisdom regarding how we judge what is true and decide what is right in public life. The intellectual habits of polarization include binary (Manichaeic) thinking, absolutizing one’s preferred values, viewing uncertainty as a weakness, privileging deductive thinking, assuming that one’s opponents are motivated by bad faith, and hesitating to agree on basic facts and the meaning of evidence.

What are the antidotes to these familiar habits? We can recognize the mindset of the polarizer, but how does the *depolarizer* understand conflict and try to make sense of the world? Here is an attempt to answer these questions, by way of proposing the seven habits of highly depolarizing people.

1. Criticize from within.

In other words, criticize the other—whether person, group, or society—on the basis of something you have in common. The political philosopher Michael Walzer describes this approach as “internal criticism.” He writes: “We criticize our society just as we criticize our friends, on the assumption that the terms of the critique, the moral references, are common.”² As Walzer and many others have observed, besides being depolarizing, criticizing from within is typically much more effective than criticizing from outside.

This idea of recognizing something that is shared with the other—even in moments of fierce conflict—is beautifully reflected in Lincoln’s use of the term “better angels” in his first Inaugural address, on the eve of the Civil War. William Seward, who would serve as Secretary of State under Lincoln, had suggested that the new President conclude by calling in hope upon the “the guardian angel of the nation.” Lincoln changed it to “the better angels of our nature.” In Seward’s version, what was needed would come from outside us. In Lincoln’s version, it would come from within us, something “better” in the “nature” of both Northerners and Southerners.

2. Look for goods in conflict.

Some conflicts are entirely about good versus evil or right versus wrong, but many (probably most) are more about good versus good or right versus right. Each side, at least in part, is likely to be defending a goal or value that both recognize as worthy. Political philosophers such as Isaiah Berlin and William Galston have referred to this type of disagreement as one of “goods in conflict.” The challenge in such cases is to recognize and weigh competing goods—a challenge that is different from (and may be harder than) distinguishing good from bad. Looking always for the possible existence of goods in conflict not only contributes to depolarization, it also contributes to achieving valid (as opposed to phony) disagreement.

3. Count higher than two.

Of all the mental habits that encourage polarization, the most dangerous is probably

binary thinking—the tendency to divide everything into two mutually antagonistic categories. Sometimes an important phenomenon actually *does* divide naturally into two and only two parts or sides, between which one all-or-nothing choice must be made. But in most cases, this way of thinking about the world is not only polarizing, it is highly simplistic and leads mainly to pseudo-disagreements as opposed to real ones. One may be the loneliest number, but in the area of social criticism and conflict, two (which is far from lonely today) is probably the most harmful. In thinking through any challenge or conflict, the highly depolarizing person’s first question to him- or herself is, “Can I count higher than two?”

4. *Doubt.*

Doubt—the concern that my views may not be entirely correct—is the true friend of wisdom and (along with empathy, to which it’s related) the greatest enemy of polarization. The playwright and political leader Václav Havel famously said that he would rather have a beer with someone who’s searching for the truth than with someone who’s found it. Now, Havel was a man of the firmest convictions. He went to jail for them and helped to start a revolution on behalf of them. So he was certainly not advocating, even in jest, a way of thinking that leads to passivity or an inability to choose; quite the opposite. He was advocating against the type of certitude that breeds smugness and contempt for one’s opponents, and which gradually transforms the natural appetite for empathetic engagement and the free play of intellect into an appetite for lecturing and pointing out to others the error of their ways. In today’s polarized environment, doubt is often treated as a weakness or even a sin (as is its cousin, changing one’s mind). But the opposite is more likely to be true. Doubt often supports true convictions based on realistic foundations, just as doubtlessness is nearly always an intellectual disability, a form of blindness.

In his second Inaugural Address in 1865, as the Civil War neared its end, Abraham Lincoln could have declared his certainty that God favored his side. But in one of the most important statements ever uttered by a U.S. President, Lincoln, who could lead a war and sacrifice his life for his convictions while remaining deeply empathetic, said simply: “The Almighty has His own purposes.”

5. *Specify.*

Because generalization is both an ally and a frequent indicator of polarization, highly depolarizing people tend to be connoisseurs of the specific. This dedication to specificity can express itself in at least four important ways.

The first way is a persistent skepticism about categories. Of course, categories and the process of categorization are essential to human thought and expression; we can’t do without them. But all categories are abstractions, and when we turn the healthy need to categorize into the sloppy habit of categorical thinking—applying abstract labels (such as the political labels “Left” and “Right”)—to everything and everyone on the grounds that we have accurately separated them into non-overlapping categories, the result is personally and socially harmful.

It's also worth remembering that, in many cases, creative and categorical thinking are at odds with each other. American musical innovators from Louis Armstrong to Charlie Parker to Bob Dylan have been famously indifferent and even hostile to musical categories: Armstrong said that the only two kinds of music are what you like and what you don't; Dylan, booed while on stage in London for not singing "folk" music, memorably told the audience that he cared about "American music." The same is true of many of our most creative scholars, including the famous mid-20th-century sociologist David Riesman and the prominent political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain, neither of whom was content for a moment to stay within a single disciplinary box or intellectual category.

A second way to favor specificity is to consider each issue separately and on its own terms, as opposed to assuming the validity of a governing ideological framework, such as "conservatism" or "liberalism." Indeed, in his seminal discussion of "the trap of ideology," the great sociologist Daniel Bell tells us:

The point is that ideologists are "terrible simplifiers." Ideology makes it unnecessary for people to confront individual issues on their own merits. One simply turns to the ideological vending machine, and out come the prepared formulae. And when these ideas are suffused with apocalyptic fervor, ideas become weapons, with dreadful results.³

A third way to specify is to privilege the specific assertion (including the empirically valid generalization) over the general assertion. As Jonathan Rauch observes, a turning point in the development of modern science was the discovery—in geology around the turn of the 19th century, and soon recognized by other fields—that shifting the argument *away* from abstract and often philosophically charged questions ("Can miracles be invoked to explain natural phenomena?") and *toward* specific empirical questions ("Are fossils found in the same order throughout the Devonian shale?") can help to diffuse paralyzing controversies and even turn ideological foes into fellow researchers.⁴ Scientists can be as stubborn and ideological as anyone else, of course, but the field's focus on specificity and empirical inquiry ("Show me!") has done much to foster more constructive conversations.

The fourth way to favor specificity is to rely first and foremost on inductive reasoning, which tries to build conclusions from the bottom up by accumulating specific data points, as compared to deductive reasoning, which tries to build conclusions from the top down by exploring the implications of true general premises or statements. Deduction is the great friend of ideology (especially "total ideology").⁵ Induction specifies.

6. *Qualify (in most cases).*

To qualify something you say is to make it less definitive, less comprehensive, and more nuanced, and thus to acknowledge the possibility that some pieces of the puzzle may still be missing. To qualify, then, is almost always to announce—even if indirectly—a willingness to engage further with the other side in pursuit of getting it

right.

Another meaning of “to qualify” is to enumerate the qualities or characteristics of something. In this sense, the habit of qualifying is cousin to the habit of specifying.

A third meaning is to be or become competent for a task or position. (As in: “She’s qualified for the job.”) The act of qualifying, then, is broadly associated with the condition of being duly prepared. In this sense, we might suggest that persons who “do not qualify”—either in the sense of lacking needed credentials *or* in the sense of making claims without duly qualifying them—are likely neither fully competent nor ready to fulfill the requirements of office or trust.

Of course, in today’s world of dueling talking points and partisan political warfare, qualifying—in the sense modifying or limiting, often by giving exceptions—is frequently treated as a sign of insufficient zeal and perhaps even of wimpiness. But for the serious mind, the opposite is true. To qualify is to demonstrate competence. And for the highly depolarizing person, to err is human; to qualify, divine.

7. Keep the conversation going.

At the very heart of democratic civil society is the idea that we don’t stop talking to one another, even when—perhaps especially when—the conversation is frustrating and seems futile. Why? Because ending the conversation is tantamount to ending the relationship, and when the relationship ends, everything hardens, polarization reigns, and your opponents turn into your enemies. When we end a conversation, we typically fill the void with accusations, name-calling, exaggeration, and the striking of poses.

Keeping the conversation going is itself a style of conversation, and even a way of thinking. The political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain reminds us that “a commitment to democratic politics, or the possibility of such a politics, commits one to an imperative to keep debates alive rather than attempting to resolve them definitively by silencing one side to a dispute....” In her own work, therefore, she strives to “articulate a strong set of claims that do not have the effect of silencing the voices of others.” She writes: “The need for, or conviction of, a correct and encompassing standpoint, the immediate excitement and visceral satisfaction of theories that make possible scenarios in which the analyst moves in on a given turf, sets up court, and summarily dispenses epistemic and political ‘justice,’ is one I eschew and devoutly hope that I avoid.”⁶

The concept of “Seven Habits of Highly Depolarizing People” draws inspiration from two sources. The first, of course, is Stephen R. Covey’s outstanding book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Indeed, Covey’s fifth habit—“Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood,” which calls for empathetic listening—is itself deeply relevant to the task of political depolarization.

The second source of inspiration is the seven virtues of classical Christianity. Moreover, just as those seven virtues are divided by teachers into two categories—the

so-called theological or transcendent virtues of faith, hope, and charity; and the so-called cardinal or natural virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—the seven habits of highly depolarizing people can also be divided into two categories, with habits one through three being the highest habits, or those of the most overarching importance, and four through seven being the cardinal habits, or those attainable intellectual habits on which so much else depends.

Will they work? They do for me. I have my own wounds from the culture wars, as many of us do, and some of mine have been self-inflicted. As I've attempted recently to transition to less polarizing ways of analyzing issues and expressing myself, I've found that it helps to keep these seven habits in mind, in the hope that they'll eventually become my intellectual default settings.

Making use of them certainly doesn't tell me *what* to think about any particular issue, but attending to them does seem to help me think more carefully and, I hope, more honestly. Ultimately habits of mind oriented to depolarization are, to change metaphors again, less a microscope than a new pair of glasses—less a way of seeing a few things more clearly than a different way of seeing many things. And surely a different way of seeing is what's needed. As Lincoln put it in 1862, when the occasion is piled high with difficulty, the first and great challenge is to think anew.

¹Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, *Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization* (Working Paper, June 2014), pp. 4, 6–7.

²Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (Basic Books, 1988), p. 230. See also pp. 143–51 for Walzer’s description of Albert Camus as a practitioner of criticism from within. While it’s true, of course, that social criticism is not in the same category of phenomena as political depolarization, Walzer’s insights about the former appear to be remarkably relevant to the latter. For example, Walzer writes (p. 151):

The standard view of critical distance rests on a homely analogy: we are more ready to find fault with other people than with ourselves. If we are to be properly critical, then, we must turn our own people into “the others.” We must look at them as if they were total strangers; or we must make ourselves into strangers to them. The trouble with the analogy is that such easy fault-finding is never very effective. It can be brutal enough, but it doesn’t touch the conscience of the people to whom it is addressed. The task of the social critic is precisely to touch the conscience. Hence heretics, prophets, insurgent intellectuals, rebels—Camus’s kind of rebels—are insiders all: they know the texts and the tender places of their own culture. *Criticism is a more intimate activity than the standard view allows* [emphasis added].

For recent social science research that supports the utility of “criticizing within,” see Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, “From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (October 7, 2015).

³Bell, *The End of Ideology* (The Free Press, 1962), p. 405. The phrase “terrible simplifiers” comes from the cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt. Scholars have offered many varying definitions of “ideology,” but here we can define it as a set of ideas, attitudes, and symbols that work together to *explain* (justify, criticize, categorize) something, or in some cases everything (this can be called a “total” ideology), and which typically contains three interrelated components: an affective component (tells me how I feel about it), a motivational component (tells me what to do about it), and a cognitive component (tells me how to think about it). It’s also worth remembering that writers going back to Marx have emphasized that an ideology typically is linked to, and serves, a particular social interest or group. As Michael Walzer puts it: “The claim to monopolize a dominant good—when worked up for public purposes—constitutes an ideology” (*Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* [Basic Books, 1983], p. 12). Ideological thinking can be very satisfying and arguably at times very productive, but research clearly suggests that ideological thinking also commonly fosters distortion, oversimplification, and the selective processing of information. See John T. Jost, “The End of the End of Ideology,” *American Psychologist* (October 2006), pp. 652–4, 657.

⁴See Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought, Expanded Edition*

(University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 70–4.

⁵Daniel Bell defines total ideology as “an all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality” that is comparable to a “secular religion.” Interestingly, he suggests that intellectuals who embrace a “total ideology” are guilty of “the sin of pride,” by which he means the hubris of “assuming they know how life should be ordered or how the blueprint of the new society should read . . .” The psychologist Hans Toch, looking at essentially the same style of thinking, describes it as a “closed system,” or “a set of beliefs that has come to be self-sufficient, in the sense that a person would no longer have to go outside of it for interpretations.” See Bell, *The End of Ideology*, pp. 302, 399–400; and Toch, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), pp. 149–153.

⁶Elshtain, *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. xii, xviii.

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