

An Exceptional America Exceptionally Divided: The Need to Bridge the Divide between Red and Blue

Vanderbilt University's student newspaper, *the Hustler*, publishes online articles each week, including a notoriously conservative opinion column entitled "Matt's Traditional American Values." Recent highlights include a defense of the so-called "Nashville Statement",¹ which condemns homosexuality and affirms fundamentalist Christian beliefs, and a call to action for pro-life activists around the world². These views likely do not reflect those of the majority of the Vanderbilt student body and thus, have elicited vehement reactions. While some students have written thoughtful articles in response, others have resorted to derision and shaming on social media. Both parties here are at fault. The columnist's articles include unnecessary, provocative statements, expressed with alienating language (e.g., "the left is insane on immigration"³). It is hard for readers to listen to his underlying argument when they feel they are under attack. At the same time, however, many of the readers do not engage in critical conversations with their adversaries. They read the first few paragraphs, get disgusted, and turn to social media.

The "Traditional American Values" column is just one of countless examples of Americans' inability to effectively communicate across the political aisle. The vast majority, it seems, see differences in opinion as irreconcilable worldviews, and others' ideas seem so offensive that they are motivated to shut down rather than engage in productive debate. In an age of harsh polarization and unprecedented party tensions, an age where the mainstream media grossly miscalculated the results of a landmark election, this problem is more important than ever before. As a result, students, politicians, and journalists urge us to "listen to one another" and "have genuine conversations." But what does this really mean? When such conversations do happen, they are rarely productive. We scarcely walk away questioning our beliefs. How do we talk about these issues in a way that bridges the divide?

This is what I asked myself as I read Stanford Law Professor Mugambi Jouet's work, *Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other*.⁴ Jouet examines American society from a global perspective, arguing that contrary to the popular interpretation of American exceptionalism, the United States is not superior, so much as different: an "exception." The U.S. stands out in areas of social policy, health policy, and economic policy compared to the rest of the Western world. For instance, the U.S. lacks a universal healthcare system, only loosely regulates gun ownership, and has notably high wealth inequality. Interestingly, polarization is both a cause and an effect of such exceptionalism. Polarization, itself, is far more intense in the U.S. than in the rest of the Western world, thus contributing to exceptionalism. On the other hand, the same forces that fuel the divide between

¹ Colleran, Matt. "Matt's Traditional American Values: In Defense of the Nashville Statement." Opinion. *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, 11 Sep. 2017. <http://vanderbilthustler.com/voices/matts-traditional-american-values-in-defense-of-the-nashville-statement.html>

² Colleran, Matt. "Matt's Traditional American Values: The global pro-life movement." Opinion. *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, 5 Nov. 2017. <http://vanderbilthustler.com/featured/matts-traditional-american-values-the-global-pro-life-movement.html>

³ Colleran, Matt. "Matt's Traditional American Values: The different right wings." Opinion. *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, 22 Oct. 2017. <http://vanderbilthustler.com/featured/matts-traditional-american-values-the-different-right-wings.html>

⁴ Mugambi Jouet's, *Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2017.

America and the rest of the world, also fuel the divide between Americans themselves. Anti-intellectualism, Christian fundamentalism, market fundamentalism (a hardline commitment to laissez-faire principles), and racial resentment have played strong roles in shaping uniquely American policies and political ideologies. Ultimately, Jouet fears that America's exceptional polarization may spell decline.

I found Jouet's book to be engaging, easy-to-read, and thought provoking, and I found myself sharing many of the author's intriguing statistics and findings out loud with my peers as I was reading. More importantly, though, Jouet unveils the forces driving political polarization and the kind of uniquely American beliefs that led to election of President Trump. He helps explain many far right stances that cosmopolitan liberals may otherwise dismiss as bigoted or uninformed. This is very valuable: We cannot hope to make progress on crucial issues such as healthcare, mass incarceration, or gun control until we understand why, for instance, a business owner would refuse to serve a same-sex couple on account of religious freedom. Jouet connects such far right views to greater historical and sociocultural movements. In the case of such a business owner, this belief is rooted in a uniquely American conception of secularism, where the practice of religion must be protected from infringements by the government. (In many other Western nations, it is viewed as the other way around.) Such an interpretation is a vestige of America's beginnings, when it served as a safe haven for those fleeing religious persecution. In illuminating the core postulates of many right-wing voters (whether populists, religious fundamentalists or free-market fundamentalists), Jouet brings us a step closer to understanding this segment and developing political solutions that account for such views.

I would argue, however, that knowing the opponent's reasoning is not enough. This book demonstrates that despite advanced understandings, despite expertise, despite compassion and the best intentions, communicating to a broad audience is extremely difficult. Ironically, this book that elucidates American polarization may be, itself, polarizing. Few conservatives would make it past the first few chapters, as they would be alienated by some of the values-based assumptions Jouet makes and some of the language he uses. In the most blatant sections, Jouet describes conservatives as chauvinistic and absolutist. He calls George Bush, Sarah Palin, and President Trump "know-nothing politicians" (59), with Sarah Palin an "even less thoughtful figure" (45) than Bush, a parochial "anti-intellectual by choice" (61). While academic in nature, the book is also personal, and Jouet leaves no doubt as to his belief on each issue he discusses. For example, in talking about abortion, Jouet concludes that "what the U.S. anti-abortion movement rationalizes as a fight for life is largely a defense of patriarchy and ultratraditionalism" (129). He is sure to call out all the well-known Republican blunders, such as Todd Akin's claim that "if it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down," (115), and Rush Limbaugh's unwarranted accusation that "Obamacare was the largest tax increase in the history of the world" (70). Jouet's statements are accurate, and they play a part in his greater argument that helps liberals understand the social, political, religious, and cultural factors behind such beliefs. However, they do little to advance his credibility and engagement with right-leaning readers.

It is likely that establishing credibility with the right was not Jouet's priority—and it does not necessarily need to be. Yet, as a country, we need to figure out how to talk across party lines more effectively. We need to not just seek to understand others' views in intellectual exercises with like-minded colleagues, but we need to engage in honest and open debate, free of ad hominem attacks, free of preconceived notions, free of scorn and disgust. We need to identify why we believe what we believe, acknowledging our roots and upbringing in shaping our

worldview, while also asking others to bring a conscious awareness of their backgrounds to the table. Most importantly, we need to question our own assumptions, the justifications we vacuously repeat again and again, challenging our views and thinking critically about the decisions made by our country. Jouet's book does a beautiful job of synthesizing the diverse sources of conservative ideologies and American exceptionalism, but it is a pity that such a remarkable work will likely not make it on to the shelves of our conservative friends.

Jouet also encourages readers to take ownership of America's flaws and strive to do better, and decreasing inter-party animosity is an important part of this. Instead of viewing polarization and gridlock as something beyond hope, we need to actively confront this issue. Hearteningly, there is promise for bridging the gap. A most telling example is the case of Megan Phelps-Roper, the daughter of the founder of Westboro Baptist Church.⁵ Phelps-Roper, who held "God Hates Jews" signs before the age of five, was convinced by conversations with strangers on Twitter to change her views. After leaving Westboro and severing familial ties, she now speaks out against religious extremism and advocates communication across party lines. She attributes this change to the open-minded and rational conversations she had with ordinary Americans on social media. Although many of us have not quite figured out how to do this yet, this example should inspire us to keep trying. Calling someone a bigot and then purposely avoiding him or her does little to change the bigotry.⁶

Through the eloquent citations of Tocqueville and in-depth examinations of domestic and foreign policy, *Exceptional America* urges Americans to question whether we are proud of what has made us so exceptional. Both liberals and conservatives would say they are proud of some of these things and deeply ashamed of others—perhaps with opposite views of the same things. I, for one, am most ashamed of how we have become estranged from one another.

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⁵ Phelps-Roper, Megan. "I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here's why I left." TED. Feb. 2017. Lecture.

https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left_-_t-901087

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"The Hate Debate." *More Perfect Union* from NPR, 6 Nov. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/481105292/more-perfect>

⁶ Beinart, Peter. "Conservatism without Bigotry." *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 2017, pp. 11–14.