

Speeches and Writings

"THE NEW TRIBALISM"

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It is good that we can be here together today – and I am honored to have this opportunity to speak to you – to offer an idea or I hear an ancient noise rising in Oregon. To my ears, it is a raucous, ragged sound. I hear it when I watch parts of the local TV news, when I read about some of the new initiative petitions in the newspaper, when I open a piece of junk mail urging me to contribute to an "anti-something" campaign.

It sounds like a hundred drummers with different drums, each beating their own rhythm. It sounds like the cacophony of a hundred tribes, each speaking their own tongue. It sounds like a hundred calls to battle.

It is the emergence of what I call the New Tribalism.

What is the New Tribalism?

It is the growth of a politics based upon narrow concerns, rooted in the exploitation of divisions of class, cash, gender, region, religion, ethnicity, morality and ideology ' a give-no-quarter and take-no-prisoners activism that demands satisfaction and accepts no compromise.

It is a raw permissiveness that escalates rhetorical excess sometimes even to physical violence.

And it is an environment where our political system of limited government is asked to take on social and religious disputes that the system cannot possibly resolve.

In Oregon we see it in arguments over timber issues and the control of federal and private lands, in the white-hot rhetoric of racial supremacists, in arguments about gay rights and property taxes, and controversies over immigration and affirmative action.

It manifests itself in sound-bite attacks and talk-show manifestos, in personal smears and incendiary language.

The result of this vituperation and negativity can be disastrous for our political system.

Two University of Oregon professors have studied "attack ads" and found the effect of one candidate going negative on the other was to turn off all voters. Instead of voting for the attacking candidate, many of his supporters decided not to vote at all .

Terms like "fascist" and "wimp," "extremist" and "FemiNazi" have become commonplace not only on radio and TV talk shows, but increasingly in our legislative halls.

One United States Senator, leaving the chamber after a recent budget debate, was reported to declare, "I'd like to take an Uzi in there and spray the place."

It is no wonder we hear jokes like the story of the candidate who spoke for an hour, then asked, "Are there any more questions?"

"Yes," came a voice from the back. "Who else is running?"

This erosion of civility in public discourse is only a surface manifestation of the New Tribalism.

Below it are the tribes themselves, small groups of like-minded people who zealously support narrowly focused political issues.

As a former attorney general and one-time candidate for governor of Oregon, I have seen this New Tribalism expressed as an atmosphere of hatred, of raw emotion, of people asking not whether your are going to be fair, but "are you with us all the way" - not with us 95 percent, but with us 100 percent on our own special issues.

I should add here that I don't mean to attack the motives of the many citizen groups whose focus on single issues arises from legitimate concerns about social justice. In some ways, single-issue activism is noble in its purity. It is not the volunteer rs' sense of underlying outrage about issues that I believe is wrong, but the unreflective superiority and intolerance that this outrage often can spawn - a moral righteousness that puts down good faith differences as unworthy of debate.

Once it becomes impossible to talk to the other side, to find points of agreement and compromise, the stage is set for social disintegration.

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How have we gotten here?

How has our public dialogue become debased to hot-button sound-bites designed to inflame emotions, not increase understanding?

How has political correctness on single issues become more important than moving forward together as a society?

How has this politics of division, this tribal politics, now become so powerful?

There is no one answer.

But there are many contributing factors.

First among them is surely economic dislocation.

We are in the midst of enormous economic changes on a global level, and that change is occurring at an unprecedented pace.

By one estimate, the world between 1985 and 1987 experienced more technological change than in the entire 140 years of the Industrial Revolution.

With that pace comes a horrifying incapacity of many people to adapt. Indeed, many once-secure people at firms as established as IBM, ATT, and Sears know now that they may be the subjects of massive layoffs as once impregnable giants now "downsize," "rightsized" or capsize.

Several Oregon pollsters not long ago came to an identical conclusion about the effects of these trends on people in our state. To a person, they reported that they had never seen such insecurity - personal, financial and political - at any time in modern history.

And we know from a reading of history that economic insecurity breeds psychic insecurity and political extremism. It fosters disconnection with social institutions.

That sense of disconnection has been deepened by other factors, including the disappearance of the Cold War.

We are now, for the first time in a half-century, bereft of a sinister outside force to unite us. The paradox here is that something in human nature demands an enemy, an "other" against whom we can fight a common fight. Without one outside our nation, we seem to look for enemies at home.

Religious fundamentalism, I believe, plays a role.

Perhaps my perspective is colored by my experience with the Rajneesh commune in central Oregon when I was Attorney General.

But it is my unyielding conclusion that religious zeal corrupts government and government corrupts religion, if the two are not kept separate and distinct with the kind of wisdom that the establishment clause of our First Amendment has commanded in American history.

I choose my words carefully here, because I know how vital strongly held religious beliefs are on a personal basis, as a way of guiding families and finding strength. But I say again that the attempt to

create a heavenly city on earth often is accompanied by an urge to exterminate the nonbelievers. That is a price that we cannot pay here in a nation devoted to ensuring the rights of all, especially in a society marked by such rich religious pluralism.

Having said that, let me quickly add that another reason for the rise of The New Tribalism comes directly from a long emphasis on individual rights and the rights of small groups.

We have seen several decades of self-assertiveness on the parts of groups that have demanded much-needed change and the counter-reactions of those who believe their own values are threatened by these changes. As I'll mention later, this trend may be on the wane. But for now, the tone of "We need to get ours" to the exclusion of all else has been well established in our society.

New advances in communications technology are also helping fuel the New Tribalism.

It is now possible, with great certainty, minor expense and the assistance of computer technology, to find demographic subgroups, whole communities not otherwise identified by geography or census tract, and to target mailings and messages to them. The common thread is not a local community, but a zealous commitment to a particular narrow cause. These cyber-communities can generate enormous amounts of energy and money for single-issue politics.

The media, the arts and entertainment also play a part.

Do not take my comments as bashing these enterprises, because indeed I am devoted to them. But there are at least three ways current trends in the media further destabilize our political environment.

- First, media of all stripes tend to cover the fringes and extremes. There's an old saying in journalism, "If it bleeds, it leads." Conflict sells better than process. Perhaps it has ever been thus, but the pack certainly is fueled by the audio-visual media, because the written press must be more extreme and sensational simply to compete. Sensationalism has spilled over into the afternoon talk shows, with their rosters of professional victims. Will we see left-handed cross-dressers become the next set of tribal victims?
- Second, the media desensitizes us to violence. Think of the unending litany of murder, rape, and casual beatings that we see every day. We all know the depressing statistic that by the age of 18 the average teenager will have seen 200,000 televised acts of violence, including 40,000 killings. I am one of those convinced that there is a causal link between this flood of images and a grotesque desensitization that makes violence in real life more common. It makes the extravagant into the norm, and makes extreme action - without the experience of offsetting psychic pain - seem acceptable, even routine!

- Finally, The New Tribalism is fueled by the fragmentation of the media. We can now simply hear what we want to hear, rather than listen thoughtfully to the main chords of common discourse. With 100 channels of cable TV and hundreds of thousands different information sites on the Internet, we are now free to simply reinforce our own ignorance, our own biases. We are losing the common pool of information that might force us to face ideas with which we disagree.

There is an old adage that "you can always tell a Harvard Man, but you can't tell him very much." Well, that is now writ large as we seek out specialized news and talk shows that fit our own preconceptions and fuel our own biases.

Another major reason for the rise of the New Tribalism comes from pressures on the family.

If families do not thrive, tribes provide a crude substitute. Pressure on the modern family unit is intense, both economically and socially.

An enormous number of kids in our society feel unwanted, and they act it. Most hate crimes - expressions of Tribal Politics in its crudest form - are committed by children under the age of 21.

Another reason is more obscure, because it's hard to talk with precision about a "national character" or ethos.

But I think of a Christmas season when someone gave me a tie, a relic from the '80s, that said in bold letters, "Dear Santa, I Want It All." That, in fact, is the motto emblazoned on the banners of the New Tribalism. It is not enough to get part of what you want, or even most of what you want - it's getting it all that counts.

Finally, the New Tribalism thrives because there are those who profit from it.

If you draw up an initiative, you and four or five of your friends and fellow believers can ask for it all, no compromise, no give-and-take, no counter-arguments. Just put it all out there for an up-or-down vote, "give me mine and leave the thinking or questioning people out."

There is money in promoting these single issue causes, sometimes big money, for those in this society who have no stake in consensus. Indeed the perpetuation of conflict and divisiveness is both their meal ticket, and their egotistical pathway to power .

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It is much easier to describe this phenomenon than it is to suggest prescriptions to help us get beyond this "us versus them" politics.

But it is absolutely vital that we try.

Let me offer a few thoughts about how we might start.

First, we must distrust the language of moral righteousness employed by those who ask for our support, our votes, our money.

Distrust those who bathe in the purity of their motives.

Judge people not by their passion for one cause, but by their capacity to calculate the consequences, long and short term, of their actions in its pursuit.

A second approach is to find our common ground.

Happily, my friends, we have it. In Oregon, a group with which I am involved sponsored a large-scale survey of the attitudes of our citizens. We asked Oregonians what they really treasured, to identify their core beliefs. The results were, to me, enormously reassuring.

Foremost was the feeling that we live where we live because we want to. We have an allegiance to our land, a sense of place. The feeling of home, of an emotional tie to a landscape that you love, is a powerful one - and one that can serve as the basis for a larger sense of shared community and unity.

Second, when asked where they wanted to put their energy, almost 90 percent responded not about their jobs or careers, but said they most valued "spending time with family and my loved ones." There is an enormous sense of caring about the family unit, whether defined traditionally or nontraditionally. This, too, can serve as a basis for shared values and shared understanding.

Now we need to expand that feeling - just a little - from our families to our schools and neighborhoods.

We need to turn our schools into communities of learning, places where students come not only to learn facts, but to learn about shared responsibility, common goals, the importance of compromise in the pursuit of objectives.

At the University of Oregon, we have tried to counter the impersonality presented by every large college - the huge lecture classes, the feeling of being lost in the crowd - by breaking our students into smaller communities of learning, Freshman Interest Groups and Freshman Seminars, Honors College and dormitories geared to common interests - ways to find friends, meet professors, and build a sense of family within the university.

On a societal basis, we need the 20th century equivalent of barn raisings. We need to reach out to our neighbors in community celebrations, community service projects, and community self-help,

everything from Neighborhood Watch programs to Habitat for Humanity.

We need to cool the overheated political discourse that dominates our media.

- We must refuse to accept simple slogans in place of thoughtful analysis;
- We must demand of our local media coverage of meaning and context of issues in addition to simple events;
- We must talk to our friends and neighbors conscientiously about the consequences of sudden and extreme action in the service of an inflammatory single issue;
- And we must let no single-issue demagogue dominate our thinking.

Our shared belief in community education plays a vital role here. We must demand these things not only of ourselves, but must also help our communities to reach a new level of understanding.

Finally, and perhaps with too much hope, let me suggest that perhaps the New Tribalism will cure itself.

Arthur Schlesinger wrote a book several years ago called *Cycles in American History*. He identified a pendulum swinging back and forth in American history between social attitudes that could be regarded as selfish, grasping, and highly individualistic, and those in which community values became ascendant.

A number of observers, myself among them, detect the cycle swinging back toward community as opposed to the individual.

I am particularly fond of one period of our history, the American Revolution. A couple set an example during that time. Their names were John and Abigail Adams. Contrary to the myths of some of the old storybooks we used to read, only a third of the colonists were on the side of the American Revolution, a third were officially "neutral," and a third sympathized with the Tories.

One time when John was away at the front, Abigail wrote to him, asking, "What shall we tell our neighbors? Why is it that we do what we do, laboring to create a new society?" And he wrote back a wonderful letter in which he said this: "You tell them that I study war, so that our children can study business, law, commerce and invention, so that their children can study art, poetry and music."

Among the many wonderful things that letter conveys is an enormous sense of trusteeship, of personal responsibility, not merely for the here and now, but for building a better society that you will never see, because that is the birthright of your children's children.

This is the American spirit. We possessed it before, and I think it is possible to have it again.

The New Tribalism does not have to be our destiny.

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