

Commentary: President Trump's critics respond: Invitations to civility

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The [White House released](#) a photograph yesterday of President Trump working out of Walter Reed National Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., while undergoing treatment for COVID-19. His [medical team said](#) he could be released as soon as today if his condition continues to improve. [Global stocks rose](#) this morning on the news.

The president's illness has not only thrown the race into turmoil—it also has revealed deep fault lines in our culture.

“The other side is less than fully human”

When the president and his wife announced they tested positive for COVID-19, some of the responses on social media were so horrific and some of their language was so profane I will not repeat them or link to them.

By contrast, [Joe Biden tweeted](#): “Jill and I send our thoughts to President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump for a swift recovery. We will continue to pray for the health and safety of the president and his family.”

[Kamala Harris added](#) she and her husband join the Bidens “in wishing President Trump and the First Lady a full and speedy recovery. We’re keeping them and the entire Trump family in our thoughts.”

And MSNBC host Rachel Maddow, no friend of the president, [tweeted](#), “God bless the president and the first lady. If you pray, please pray for their speedy and complete recovery—and for everyone infected, everywhere.”

Some of Trump’s critics are responding to him and his wife as people whose ideas they oppose. Others are responding to them as enemies who should be punished or worse.

In [*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*](#), Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: “To be sure, many elections in the past have been raw, rude, and raucous in their rhetoric. That is part of the competitive nature of electoral politics. But something new is happening, the sense that the other side is less than fully human, that its supporters are not part of the same moral community as us, that somehow their sensibilities are alien and threatening, as if they were not the opposition within a political arena, but the enemy, full stop.”

How did we get here?

Three reasons for our divisions

Rabbi Sacks cites three factors that explain the depth of our divisiveness.

One: The deepening individualism of Western society since the 1960s.

When we were facing the Great Depression and two world wars, our external threats and financial challenges united us against common enemies. Recent decades of relative peace have atrophied such unity.

Two: The “narrowcasting” effect of the internet.

Previously, news came to us through networks that presented a broad range of opinions and held to journalistic standards based on balance and truth in reporting. Sacks laments that we have now moved from

“broadcasting” to “narrowcasting,” which he defines as “news filtered to reflect our given interest and political stance.”

Such reporting strengthens our confirmation bias, the subliminal desire to see our beliefs ratified. Studies have shown associating with people who share our views makes us progressively more extreme in these views.

Three: The “disinhibition effect.”

The new media gives everyone a microphone. The best way to communicate is face-to-face; the worst way is for communication to be anonymous, invisible and unregulated. But the latter describes the way [3.5 billion people](#) communicate every day.

Sacks comments: “I can simply say what I feel better for having said, without consideration or restraint. This is not the normal logic of communication, which is to inform, persuade, or convince. Rather, this is communication as primal therapy, and it helps create the anger it then expresses and amplifies.”

Three opportunities for God’s people

As children of the God who is love (1 John 4:8), we should be a model of civility in a divisive day. The good news is the faith we follow holds the answer to all three sources of such divisiveness.

Individualism is countered by the unity we find in Jesus. In him, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female” (Galatians 3:28).

When last did worshiping Jesus draw you closer to someone with whom you disagree?

Confirmation bias is countered by submitting to the truth and authority of

God's word, even—and especially—when it disagrees with our opinions. Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

When last did reading the Bible change your mind and heart?

The **disinhibition of social media** is countered by the grace of Jesus: “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). When we know we are pardoned sinners, we are motivated to pardon other sinners.

When last did you pray for someone whose actions or opinions angered you?

Will you today?

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[How President Trump's critics have responded to his illness: Three sources of incivility and three invitations for Christians](#) was first published in The Daily Article by the [Denison Forum](#). Daily Articles are republished in the Baptist Standard under agreement with Denison Forum and are not intended to represent the Standard's views.