

Border Lions

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 27 June 2017 15:22



"I had once hoped my father might approve of you, even though you're a dancer," he began. "But when I saw you on New Year's Day, I realized he never would."

*Monroe then spent the next half hour telling me why he could never marry me: that I didn't cook Chinese food, that I was an only child so I hadn't learned how to care for children, that I didn't embroider, darn, or tat. I wasn't sufficiently political either. I didn't show enough empathy for what our people in China were enduring at the hands of the Japanese, I didn't appreciate the deprivations of Chinese in this country, and I hadn't been through Angel Island, so I would never understand the terrible things that happened to our people there." - Lisa See, **China Dolls** (Random House, 2014)*

With the horrific shooting on June 14 of a Republican congressman, Steve Scalise, and others at a baseball practice near Washington, one can hope that we Americans have finally reached a tipping point. That the perhaps natural political and social fault lines and differences we have grown accustomed to have now metastasized and become criminalized to the boundary lines - borders if you will - of a civilized democracy. Perhaps a wakeup call has sounded as we fervently wish that Mr. Scalise recovers fully from his grievous gunshot wound.

Well, we can hope so. My recent exposure to the news has been disheartening in this regard, however. With our president's approval ratings having dropped to historic lows for someone so newly elected, 39% or so on average, we almost appear to have another civil war brewing. The nonpartisan Pew Research Center, for example, reported last year that 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats believed the other party's policies constituted a *national threat*.

The print media are certainly looking like a coalesced society. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today* and many other major papers - even the *Wall Street Journal* at times - are sharpening their anti-Trump knives. One point of growing (not among journalists) agreement: stop the \$%^&\$#% tweeting.

As the *Times* editorialized on June 8, "Apart from Comey and the Russia investigation, Trump has systematically attacked the institutions of American life that he sees as impediments." He denounced judges and the courts. He has attacked journalists . . . he has publicly savaged Democrats and Republicans who stand up to him . . . And perhaps most fundamentally, he simply lies at every turn."

Or listen to Chris Cillizza, CNN Editor-at-large: "We are now talking about the President of the United States being investigated for possibly obstructing justice in relation to a criminal probe about a foreign government meddling in our elections for the purpose of defeating his Democratic opponent."

One of the mistakes made by the mainstream media titans, not to mention little guys like me, is the result of assuming that the conventional (remember Watergate?) lines of argument against the president and his closest associates will lead in linear fashion to wrongdoers - demise. The drumbeat of the president's negative press coverage has been steady if not intensifying since he became a political candidate (after the premature laughing died down). The conservative Media Research Center reported that 88% of the president's press coverage during his first month in office was negative. Assuming that number is valid, there's obviously not much room for further intensification though 98% is at least theoretically possible. In any case, he's still standing though Watergate did take nearly 26 months (from the hotel break-in until Nixon's resignation).

Despite this carpet bombing of negative coverage for Trump, his base of loyal supporters remains stubbornly in place, somewhere in the 35-40% vicinity. "Deplorables" appear unlikely to flip, perhaps ever. The *Times* published a fascinating letter from one of them, Kenton Woodhead (yep, his real name) on June 8. He said:

"Every time you and your brethren at other news organizations dream up a new scheme to get Mr. Trump, we out here in deplorable land increase our support for him . . . And I love it that you are having the exact opposite effect on those of us you are trying to persuade to think otherwise." In other words, my mind is made up so don't even try to dissuade me with the facts. They're your facts, not mine, and besides he won and she lost and the Russia thing is a hoax along with climate change and . . .

I'm almost getting to like this fellow Woodhead. Probably unknowingly, he is harkening back to my fellow social psychologist Jack Brehm's theory of psychological reactance. Brehm demonstrated in the 1960's that when people feel their personal freedoms are being limited or taken away, they take predictable steps to reassert them. One derivation of his theory is that if you keep claiming XXX XXX XXX, I'm going to counter with YYY YYY YYY. To Trump critics, it's almost as if they never heard the saying that if you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. The deplorables are simply never going to come around. Trump himself alluded to this himself last year publicly when he claimed that "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." That's a pretty incredible boast to make but he made it and apparently it is pretty nearly true. What say you, Woodhead old chap?

So where do we stand today on this matter of increasing hostility and sharper boundaries, borders and delineations between our fellow Americans? Is it doing us any good and what if our country were to confront another catastrophic external threat (think North Korea, for example, or ISIS)? The way things have been going lately we are about to step on an IED.

There aren't any easy solutions, unless we plan to locate a magic wand and completely remake social media, mainstream media, extremist groups on the right and left, and the entire fake news industry and their cohorts. Too much social reengineering for my sensibilities or prognosticating confidence. A bridge too far.

But we've been united before, perhaps most notably during the Second World War - though it didn't come easily even 75 years ago. Prior to Pearl Harbor, many Americans thought we should mind our own business and let Europe fight Hitler and Mussolini themselves. After Pearl, the situation reversed. The president, the incomparable FDR, aided by a relatively unified congress and an incredible industrial surge - plus unprecedented sacrifice by ordinary people - rose to the occasion and literally saved the world.

No one in their right mind wants another Pearl Harbor to bring us back together today. In its

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absence, though, perhaps there are some things we can unite behind to get on the right track and at least attempt to sing from the same hymnbook. How about we all try absorbing political material that comes from sources we disagree with or makes points we consider essentially pointless? In part, that's what going to college is all about. Fox viewers try MSNBC and vice versa. (I know, perish the thought.) Go out of your way to converse with the other side, including those you consider politically reprehensible. And promise yourself, and your mother and your dog, that you WILL NOT lose your temper. Go to church more often than usual. See if you can get some one-on-one time with your pastor or rabbi or nutty Uncle Bert. Buy some Roloids or wine. Get the other side's t-shirt or cap and wear it around town.

Above all, look into your heart and ask yourself, how many more Steve Scalise's do you want to hear about? None of us is very likely to live long enough to see another FDR or Lincoln so what can we do in the meantime? And yes, putting down your phone much more often might be a good step. Free, too.

Go on, chew up the borders. Be a lion.