

The Commentator
January 24, 2012

My fellow Americans: to solve problems, open your minds
By Lawrence J. Haas

Perhaps the most depressing story on American politics in recent days adorned the *Washington Post's* front page. The dateline was Laurens, South Carolina, and the story began this way:

Once upon a time — oh, about two presidential elections ago — Dianne Belsom would get up in the morning and read the paper, taking in news stories about candidates and campaigns. Some stuff she agreed with, some she didn't.

This morning, Belsom wakes in her splendidly restored pink Victorian on Main Street in this rural South Carolina town, makes coffee and settles in at her desktop to fire up Facebook. There on her news feed are more than 100 stories that some of her 460 friends have posted since Belsom went to bed eight hours ago.

Over the next three hours, Belsom bops around the Web checking out the latest campaign news. Her sources are big and small, from nearby Greenville to faraway California, but they have one thing in common: With rare exceptions, the news and commentary sites Belsom visits share her worldview, which she describes as “conservative, tea party, Christian.”

She reads about why Ron Paul is out of step with conservatism at Commentary magazine's site and Breitbart.tv. She takes in arguments about why Mitt Romney is too moderate at newsmax.com and Vision to America. And she nods firmly as she looks at comments from fellow Newt Gingrich supporters at teapartynation.com and the *Washington Times* site.

If Belsom and her millions of counterparts across America — liberals and conservatives alike — wanted to broaden their minds instead of narrowing them, I would have plenty of things to recommend for their reading pleasure. Before turning there, however, let's discuss the implications of Belsom's narrow-mindedness.

To be sure, no single factor explains the growing polarization of American politics.

For one thing, political parties have lost power and single-issue groups have risen to take their place, providing the money and ground troops on which candidates rely; when these candidates win, the groups expect them to toe the line on their particular issues rather than compromise with those who hold different views.

For another, states have increasingly drawn congressional districts to greatly favor one party or the other — that is, making them overwhelmingly Republican or overwhelmingly Democratic, rather than a healthy mix of both; lawmakers then cater to their one-party constituencies rather than seek bipartisan compromise.

Nevertheless, growing polarization is also driven by the altered viewing habits of America's voters. Like Belsom, more Americans find comfort in the news outlets that echo their beliefs rather than offer opposing viewpoints.

Americans are becoming a politically narrower people, moving to the extremes of liberalism or conservatism and forcing their elected representatives to mimic them in word and deed. Officials who seek to work across the political aisle find themselves under severe rhetorical attack and, in a growing number of cases, challenged from within their parties.

Utah's conservative Republican senator, Robert Bennett, lost his state party's nomination for a fourth term in 2010 for the crimes of cooperating with Oregon's liberal Democrat, Ron Wyden, on health care legislation, voting for bipartisan financial bail-out legislation in 2006, and other bipartisan outrages.

Republican senator John McCain, the 2008 GOP presidential nominee, was forced to fend off a similar challenge in 2010 in his home state of Arizona, also because he allegedly was not conservative enough. In 2006, Connecticut's senator Joe Lieberman, the 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee, lost his primary because he wasn't liberal enough – specifically, he had worked with President Bush on the Iraq war – though he later won re-election by running as an independent.

None of this is good for America.

For one thing, the United States remains essentially a 50-50 nation, which explains why power has shifted between the parties so often in recent decades. Neither party has any reasonable hope of securing both the White House and the requisite seats in Congress to enact its agenda on its own.

For another, the problems that bedevil America require bipartisan solutions.

America can't address its fiscal woes without a bipartisan approach on spending cuts (particularly in federal health and retirement programs) and tax increases – liberals must accept the former, conservatives the latter. Nor can America maintain its global leadership without a bipartisan defense strategy, akin to the "containment" strategy that both parties pursued for the more than four decades of the Cold War.

So, my fellow Americans, here's the sad truth: you need to broaden your minds, not narrow them. Leave your comfort zones.

If you're a liberal, read the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, subscribe to the *Weekly Standard*, skim National Review Online, scan the websites of the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, and see what the Tax Foundation says about tax policy and what the Foundation for Defense of Democracies says about foreign affairs.

If you're a conservative, read the *New York Times*' editorial page, subscribe to the *New Republic*, skim Huffington Post, scan the websites of the Center for American Progress and Brookings Institution, and see what the Economic Policy Institute says about domestic affairs and what the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says about foreign affairs.

You won't agree with much, probably most, of what you read. That's the point – to consider different views and alternative frames of reference.

Read. Think. Ponder.

If enough of us do it, perhaps we can regain our ability to find common ground.

Lawrence J. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore. He writes widely about foreign and domestic affairs.