

## RESPONSES

### On Re-imagining and De-polarising America: Replies to Elliot Benjamin

#### I

### Save Us from Trumpitis: A Response to Elliot Benjamin's Review of *Re-Imagining America*<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Schaefer Ph.D.

I am sitting in my study on Tuesday afternoon, 9 February, looking out at a snow-covered garden and listening to Donald Trump's second impeachment trial while also reflecting on Elliot Benjamin's review of my book, *Re-Imagining America: Finding Hope in Difficult Times* (Hawthorn Press, 2019).<sup>1</sup> It is a very fair and detailed review which links my broader social and economic concerns embodied in twelve essays written between 2004 and 2018 to the quite specific, more psychological, approach to social healing and communication advocated by Kirk Schneider in his book *The De-Polarization of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing* (University Professors Press, 2020).

I very much appreciate the linkage and have for some time been thinking about the question of what can be done to assist the many Americans deluded by Donald Trump and far-right conspiracy theories such as Q Anon to re-engage with the facts and deeper values of American society. Benjamin wishes that both Dr Schneider and I had focused more on this question, whereas in writing the essays (most between 2015 and 2018) that compose my book I was concerned with understanding the earlier question of how we got to the place as a society where we could even consider electing such an authoritarian con artist.

Benjamin in particular values the work of Bandy Lee and her insights into cult indoctrination and media manipulation as an approach to healing the sick minds of many

Trump supporters.<sup>2</sup> While I can agree that such an approach might be very helpful for the more disturbed members of the large and broad camp of Trump supporters, I think it can easily discount the social and economic conditions which make people susceptible to authoritarian personalities and outlandish ideas in the first place. So I again want to re-emphasize these conditions and advocate for their amelioration. If I turn to the main causes of why over 74 million Americans voted for Donald Trump in 2020 despite his miserable performance as President, I come to the following reasons, described in order of priority.

**1 The ending of a 400-year history of a dominant white, male, Christian caste system in the United States in which blacks, indigenous people and women were lower, less favored and discriminated against members of the social order.**

Trump's victory came after the eight years of the Obama presidency, and the former's opponent in the election of 2016 was a secular professional woman. It was white, Christian males from mainly rural areas who provided Trump with his largest base of support, and it is they who felt most threatened by the newly emerging multi-racial, multi-ethnic, largely urban majority. It is estimated that by 2045 the United States will no longer have a majority white population and this, plus the dwindling number of active Christians among the young, are well publicized facts feeding the fear and resentments that Trump preys upon.

See, for example, the remarkable study *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson to truly appreciate the power and relevance of this argument; and also ‘How America ends’ by Yoni Appelbaum.<sup>3</sup>

**2 The widening gap between rich and poor, or the scourge of income inequalities in the United States.** When ordinary production workers earn about the same as they did in the 1970s (with wages adjusted for inflation), despite productivity rising by over 200 per cent in the last five decades, and when almost half of the population has difficulty meeting an emergency expense of over \$500, we know we live in a corporate kleptocracy with an eroding middle class and extensive economic hardship. Trump’s slogan to ‘Make America Great Again’ was a nostalgic reference to a bygone era when an industrial worker could earn enough to support a family and have a life of relative dignity. Globalization, automation, and corporate greed and power have made this dream a vain illusion, while an advertising dollar-controlled media has helped to direct the resulting anger against immigrants, blacks, women and liberals rather than against the elites of a neo-liberal economy.

The impact of severe income inequalities on mental health, addictions, longevity, crime, domestic abuse and other social maladies has been extensively researched and described in the work of Wilkinson and Pickett and commented on by Robert Reich and many others.<sup>4</sup> It is striking that white males between the ages of 50 and 75 have had a declining longevity rate in the US since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a fact shared by no other Western democracy.

President Joe Biden’s efforts to raise the Federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, to increase child credits to families with dependent children, to make the tax system more progressive and to explore forms of a guaranteed annual income are all significant

steps in addressing economic inequality. There is hope that the American Rescue Plan can make a significant difference in the economic well-being of many Americans. As will finally starting a badly needed infrastructure re-building program.

**3 The visceral experience of global warming and the climate crisis,** with pollution, wildfires, increased storms and hurricanes, flooding and global sea rise, as well as desertification and land erosion, creates fear about the future of the earth among many people. While human agency in climate change is vehemently denied by most Republicans, the tide is shifting internationally and nationally. Acknowledging the reality of climate change and seeking to not demonize the workers and companies engaged in fossil fuels and natural-resource extraction while committing to renewable energy and a carbon-neutral economy will go a long way toward removing this emotional trauma from the minds of many working-class people. A real commitment to locating renewable energy ventures in the industrial heartland of the country by the Biden Administration would be a tremendous help in weakening the appeal of violent right-wing conspiracies.

**4 The manipulation of the news, of information and of ‘facts’ by social-media companies** is a prime cause of the dysfunction of American society, and a great threat to the future of democracy around the world. See, for example, the ‘Social Dilemma’ documentary (available on Netflix) for a powerful treatise on the treacherous impact of the media companies and their underlying business model. Controlling the power of these companies and dealing with the limits of First Amendment Rights become an essential, if complex, aspect of having a healthy social future, as Eliot Benjamin rightly notes.

I realize that I am arguing for addressing the very issues which led to the politics of

resentment and the success of Trump in the first place. Unless such a broad effort of social and economic reform is attempted, the more focused efforts of psychological support and healing will be wasted on the narrow slice of the population willing to seek such help.

At a deeper level I feel that unless we as a society can face and transform the stain of slavery and our treatment of indigenous peoples, can face our deeply flawed history, much as the Germans did with facing the legacy of Nazism in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we will continue our decline as a nation and culture. Only when we can face the ways in which we have betrayed our founding principles in both domestic and international affairs, as indeed all people and nations do to some degree – in short, unless we can grow up and face our shadow – we won't be able to realize the promise of America to be 'the fact, the symbol and the promise of a new beginning'. as Jacob Needleman hoped in describing the American character.<sup>5</sup>

As I finish this reflection, Trump has again been acquitted by the Senate, casting doubt on our ability as a people to free ourselves from vain illusions and adolescent fantasies. Yet we did elect an African American President, legalize gay marriage and turn Trump into a one-term president. Perhaps we can manifest a new, modest and self-reflective maturity in the years ahead and take further steps in realizing our founding mission to honor the equality of all human beings and the sacredness of all life forms.

## Notes and References

- 1 Elliot Benjamin, 'Extended review essay: Healing and re-imagining the United States in the time of Trump', *AHP Magazine for Self and Society*, No. 6, Winter 2021; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ym4w4red> (accessed 22 April 2021; restricted).
- 2 Benjamin, pp. 9, 10.
- 3 See Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents*, Random House, New York, 2020, pp. 311–63. See also her *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2020. Yoni Appelbaum makes the argument that the unwillingness to accept the election results by Trump supporters is due to white privilege and racism and the fear of a future multi-racial majority. See his 'How America ends', *The Atlantic*, December 2020; available at <https://tinyurl.com/9cj733m6> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- 4 See, for example, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, Allen Lane, London, 2009; and Robert B. Reich, *Income Inequality in the United States: Testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress*, 16 January 2014; available at <https://tinyurl.com/yf6y3bdc> (accessed 22 April 2021).
- 5 Jacob Needleman, *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*, Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2002, p. 5.

## About the contributor

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## II

### A Rejoinder to Elliot Benjamin's Review of *The Depolarizing of America*

**Kirk Schneider**

I found Elliot Benjamin's review of my book *The Depolarizing of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing* to be on the whole both fair and highly perceptive. Benjamin is right that I do take an aspirational approach with my book because I believe many people are ready to shift the status quo in our country. That status quo rests on 'knee-jerk' bipartisanship, bitter and presumptuous in-fighting, and heavy influence by powers such as media and political institutions, with vested interests in angering people and keeping them in conflict. One basis for this, perhaps the major one, is that it sells. Anger and conflict bring drama to the masses, and drama, as any playwright (or, for that matter, propagandist) recognizes, engages people and compels them to invest.

That said, there are studies, such as the one I cite in *The Depolarizing of America*, that strongly suggest that when left to themselves, people have a lot more in common than they typically realize (see pp. 75–8). This research suggests that more people could unite from direct person-to-person contact than is generally recognized. This is a point that Benjamin overlooks in his review, and yet is vital both to my book and that of Schaefer's, which he also reviews. I also point out that a post-workshop survey of 1,800 Braver Angels participants (both liberal and conservative) showed that they felt both more understood and less angry toward those on the 'other side' than prior to their workshop. I point out further that although these participants don't represent the most strident partisans in the USA, they do reflect the over 10,000 Braver Angels members who decided it was time to talk with, rather than badger, the other side.

Hence, while I agree with Benjamin's critique that more is needed than humanizing dialogue to move toward national healing, and that Bandy Lee and her colleagues make vital points about the many hardcore Trump supporters (and some liberal leaders) being dialogically unreachable, I don't agree with Lee and, by implication, Benjamin that Trump supporters en masse are under a cultic spell. To the contrary, there are many such supporters, as Braver Angels and other experiential dialogue formats show, who are quite willing to sit down and talk to their counterparts, and sometimes achieve common ground. The one caveat is that the conditions must be conducive. By conducive, I mean several things: (1) there needs to be a relative balance between liberals and conservatives in workshop groups; (2) there needs to be adherence to ground rules of curiosity and respect (vs presumption and devaluation); and (3) there needs to be a modicum of decorum.

Perhaps the upshot here is that we need to be more nuanced about how we look at human beings, both Left and Right; and we need to assume a *both/and* policy with regard to the respective approaches discussed in Benjamin's review. There is much agreement between us that many people cannot be reached directly with either one-on-one or group processes, and that Lee's 'triage' approach may be necessary in many of these cases. At the same time, there is some disagreement about the range of such cases. I believe and have witnessed that many other people can be engaged directly in dialogue. But it is also not necessarily through 'rational' persuasion or presentation of facts. These are often a part of such dialogues, but personally I find that what is perhaps most

salient in these dialogues is not so much the content but the *process* that ensues. That is, what many take away from these dialogues is a realization that the ‘other’ is not the monster they stereotyped them to be, and that the act of simply being present and attentively listening to the other is worth its weight in gold on the long road toward national healing.

So, if there’s great division in the USA (and the world) – which there surely is – there is also a growing number of people who are depolarizing as a result of direct person-to-person contact. If we can reach enough of those people (as well as a few at the fringe through Lee’s methods), perhaps we can create a critical mass. This critical mass will not create a panacea, but it can potentially render the most menacing elements of our humanity ineffectual.

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### **About the contributor**

**Kirk Schneider** is the current president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute (EHI), past president (2015–2016) of the Society for Humanistic Psychology (Division 32) of the American Psychological Association, recent past editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (2005–2012), and adjunct faculty member at Saybrook University and Teachers College, Columbia University. A Fellow of five Divisions of the APA, he has authored or edited 13 books, including *The Spirituality of Awe*, *The Polarized Mind*, *Awakening to Awe*, *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*, and *The Depolarizing of America*, as well as several hundred papers etc. For more information visit <https://kirkjschneider.com>.

### **Note**

These extended commentaries are a response by the authors of the two books reviewed in the previous issue of the online magazine – i.e. Elliot Benjamin, Extended review essay: Healing and re-imagining the United States in the time of Trump, *AHP Magazine for Self and Society*, No. 6, Winter 2020–1 (available online at <https://tinyurl.com/ym4w4red>; accessed 22 April 2020; restricted).

### **SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM**

“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together, all things connect.” (1854)

**Chief Seattle, 1786–1866**