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Across the Great Divide

In a recent poll by the American Psychiatric Association, 56 percent of respondents acknowledged they are either extremely or somewhat anxious about the impact of politics on their daily life.

And “anxious” may be the perfect word for the general tone of contemporary public discourse. The seemingly constant sniping between opposing political camps, streams of angry tweets, diplomatic breakdowns and the ever-uncertain status of nuclear programs around the globe add up to a frenzied, even apocalyptic feel that pervades everything from media coverage to political speech to online interaction.

But is the doomsday rhetoric and ever-churning news wheel unique to our moment in time, or have we been here before? A group of UC Santa Barbara historians weighs in on other anxiety-provoking periods in our country’s past.

Civil War

The most obvious point of comparison for a polarized, partisan society is the Civil War. But associate professor Giuliana Perrone, a specialist in the history of slavery and race in North America, finds the period immediately following that conflict particularly resonant to our moment in time. “In some instances, it’s very eerie because the conversations themselves are nearly identical,” she explained. “We’re having conversations about confederate monuments, the creation of memory and the legacies of slavery. It’s actually somewhat frightening that they’re so similar.” The demonstrations in Charlottesville, she noted, bore a striking resemblance to

other white-supremacist rallies that took place in the late 1800s.

But there's a key difference: Following the Civil War, the violent rhetoric of the antebellum era died down, giving way to a tacit acceptance of Jim Crow laws and mob justice. Things may have been openly violent on the local level, but nationally, a country trying to heal its wounds turned away from open discussions of race. "In my own observations of current conversations, what you have is a sort of bubbling to the surface of very old and deeply rooted sentiments," Perrone said. "It's a reminder that we are not a post-racial society."

For that reason, current discussions of race may actually be a positive thing, even if they're more openly divisive.

Immigration Issues

"We are at a strange nationalist movement in our history that echoes some other times," said Professor Paul Spickard, an expert in U.S. social and cultural history. "But they're not good times." Anti-immigration waves occur frequently in our history — Spickard estimates about one per generation — but the current moment reminds him of the period immediately after World War I.

Although President Woodrow Wilson advocated for a more global outlook, including joining the newly founded League of Nations, his viewpoint wasn't popular with a war-weary nation. "The country was taken over by a whole lot of people who wanted to hide from the world," Spickard said.

A growing dislike of foreigners — including people from Poland, Italy and Japan — culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, intended to "cut off immigration from Asia entirely and severely cut down immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe." The famously xenophobic law was a barely veiled response to the widespread dislike of Catholic, Jewish and non-white immigrants. Spickard explained that this period also gave America the beginning of a "secret police apparatus" that carried out raids against labor unions and persecuted suspected anarchists, communists and liberals. "That period felt like 'there are good Americans, and there are people who don't belong.'"

The Fourth Estate and the Silent Majority

But for modern-day attacks on the media, in Distinguished Professor Nelson Lichtenstein's opinion, the Nixon era offers the best parallel. During the Vietnam War, even as some journalists revealed the dark underside of the unpopular war (think Seymour Hirsch, the freelance writer who first broke the story of the My Lai massacre), a largely dissatisfied public primarily saw the media as complicit with a dishonest government. But it came to a head when Richard Nixon — and his famously vitriolic vice president, Spiro Agnew — launched a full-scale attack against the mainstream media.

According to Lichtenstein, director of the campus's Center for the Study of Work, Labor and Democracy, Nixon argued that the press was out of touch with what most Americans — what Nixon called the "silent majority" — actually thought and wanted. And he wasn't shy about his personal hatred for the Fourth Estate, which he felt was responsible for his unsuccessful 1960 campaign for the presidency (he lost to John F. Kennedy) and his continued unpopularity.

"Nixon had his list of people who were against him: journalists, politicians," Lichtenstein said. "People viewed that as a threat, that he was going to use the organ of state to prosecute his political enemies." And in many ways, Lichtenstein went on, he did, openly searching for ways to undermine individual television networks and encouraging Agnew to publically insult the "nattering nabobs of negativism" and "impudent snobs" of the mainstream media.

Though both Nixon and Agnew eventually resigned, they helped to nurture a conservative distrust of the mainstream media that continues even now, and that the current political climate — and presidential administration — has made only more visible.

Not as Polarized as Our Discourse Might Suggest

"I cannot remember a time like this. Unless perhaps it was 1968, when the country felt it was careening out of control," noted Professor Laura Kalman, a specialist in 20th-century U.S. history. "1968 is often cited as the most turbulent year in American history." Over a 12-month period, both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; North Vietnam launched the infamously violent Tet offensive; and the country broke out in a rash of protests over both war and civil-rights issues.

The general sense, Kalman said, was that things were coming apart at the seams. "Of course, the events of 1968 were more ostensibly dramatic, but there's a similar

feel.”

What’s really changed, according to Kalman, is the media coverage itself. “In the 1960s and 1970s, we didn’t have government by tweets, so we didn’t know as much,” she said. “But in addition, we were all still watching the same TV news shows. Newspapers were more influential then. There wasn’t a 24-hour news cycle.”

Kalman pointed out that Americans may not be as polarized as our discourse might lead us to believe: the Stanford political scientist Morris Fiorina has shown that most Americans actually agree with one another on major issues, and the more polarized viewpoints we hear come from politicians and political activists. “The talking heads on television give the impression of intense polarization,” Kalman says.

The Social Media Effect

For Alice O’Connor, whose expertise lies in U.S. public policy, the more interesting aspect are what make our current era different. While extreme partisanship is nothing new in American history, “right now what you have is the combination of extreme partisanship and a willingness to nullify the work of government and extreme withdrawal of a sense of public responsibilities,” she said. “Combine that with a proliferation of new technologies — including social media and the internet more generally — and you open the door to the constant barrage of ‘commentary’ and incendiary exchange.”

It’s not that extreme viewpoints haven’t found an audience before now — O’Connor cites the incendiary anti-immigrant and pro-fascist 1930s sermons of Father Charles Coughlin, who reached a significant audience through the fairly new medium of broadcast radio, as an example. But she says extreme viewpoints today are being given more prominent platforms.

While there have been periods in history when the media was distrusted, O’Connor says it was able to play a corrective role in the 1970s, calling public attention to the events of the Watergate episode and exposing the contents of the Pentagon Papers, which discussed previously undisclosed military activities taken during the Vietnam War. “Now, I think the media, as one of the institutions of democracy that we would look to as a corrective, is still there, but it’s disempowered, surrounded by this other media that’s in a position to distract, undermine and create alternative views,” she says.

Mass Mobilization

Lichtenstein sees it differently: “I don’t link this up to modern technology. You could do this with press releases.” Instead, it’s the vulgarity and entertainment factor that he sees as unique to the moment. In the Nixon era, “they were attacking the press for being critical, but they had to do it with a certain finesse,” he said. “Now, it’s like the id has been released. I feel like a Victorian.”

Still, there’s a benefit to the open-and-out atmosphere of the moment, Lichtenstein continued. “There is no more ‘silent generation,’” he said. “Today, all sorts of people are mobilized. So it’s healthy in that respect.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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