

# Yearning for unity, enduring divisiveness

This is the final installment of *Divided America*, AP's exploration of the economic, social and political divisions in American society.

By **JERRY SCHWARTZ**  
Associated Press

Though they live about 1,730 miles apart, though they've never met, though they are of different races and backgrounds, Lauren Boebert and Dorothy Johnson-Speight speak almost in unison when they lament the fracturing of America.

Americans must "come together, be non-judgmental about people and their opinions," says Johnson-Speight. Americans must "come together as one," says Boebert.

And yet these two women stand squarely at the epicenter of American acrimony — territory explored by The Associated Press in "Divided America," a series of stories that surveyed a United States that is far from united.

Boebert owns the gun-friendly Shooters Grill in the aptly named town of Rifle, Colorado, and wears a handgun. Johnson-Speight fights for gun control laws after the 2001 murder of her 24-year-old son Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson, shot seven times in a dispute over a Philadelphia parking spot.

Their differences are stark, but their yearning for a more civil and less divided nation is genuine. In that, they mirror other Americans interviewed over the past six months. They are caught up in a campaign that magnified its disagreements, and left them longing for harmony; they live in a country that cannot square its present with its pedigree as "one nation, under God, indivisible."

The fact is, America's dif-



ferences are real, and cannot be glossed over.

In Missoula, Montana, an effort to welcome dozens of refugees — Congolese, Afghans, Syrians — was met with demonstrations and angry confrontations. "I didn't do this to be controversial. I didn't do this to stir the pot," says Mary Poole, one of the leaders of the refugee project — but she did. Two patriotic visions came into conflict: the America that welcomes the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, and the America still shaken by terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and in the years since, insisting on homeland security above all.

On New York's Staten Island, police and the policed struggle to coexist. On an island that is home to 3,000 police officers, a black man suspected of selling loose cigarettes died in an encounter with police in 2014. The black community knows the police do an important job, but it is deeply distrustful after the death of Eric Garner and other violent encounters with authority. Police, meanwhile, feel unappreciated, their character impugned. "I think the divide is worse than it should be and more than people think it is," says retired detective Joe Brandefine.

At the Christian Fellowship Church in Benton, Kentucky, pastor Richie Clendenen tells his congregation, "There's nobody more hated in this nation than Christians." Evangelical Christians' numbers are in decline, their political clout diminished. On signal issues — particularly same-sex marriage — they have lost, at least for the moment. They



AP Photo/Claire Galofaro

**Billy Prater, 27, adjusts a Donald Trump sign on his fence in Beech Creek, W.Va., in Mingo County in April. Laid off from the mines, he had been out of work for more than a year. Now he works for the railroad, but the major customer is the collapsing coal industry so his work is unsteady. He was a registered Democrat from a family of diehard Democrats. But when he hung the Trump sign, his neighbors started calling and sending him messages, asking where he got it and how to get their own. "Everybody on this creek wants one," he said. "He's honest. He says thing that he probably shouldn't say. We respect that, because it means he's not buttering us up."**

are angry and frustrated and unwilling to surrender. "We are moving more and more in conflict with the culture and with other agendas," says David Parish, a former pastor at Christian Fellowship.

There's so much more: Americans split on climate change, between those who say it is an existential threat and those who deny it is happening or at least that man has anything to do with it. Even as they contemplate electing the first woman president, even as women take on combat roles, Americans are struggling with a misogynistic backlash, online and in real life. Then there's the gun debate, which Adam Winkler, a constitutional law professor at UCLA says is "more polarized and sour than any time before in American history."

There is common ground. At the Annn Flagmakers fac-

tory in South Boston, Virginia, seamstress Emily Bouldin says Americans "may be divided on some things, but when it comes down to the most important things we come together." Nearly all Americans, according to surveys, believe in small business, the public schools, helping the less fortunate and caring for veterans.

Some differences, though, are profound and lasting, having less to do with what people think and more to do with where they fall — on which side of the line between prosperity and ill-fortune.

In Logan, West Virginia, in central Appalachia, the decline of the coal industry has brought a population drain, rampant drug abuse, heightened poverty (cremations are up because folks can't afford caskets) and deep resentment that fed sup-

port for Republican Donald Trump: "I don't know what's in his head, what his vision is for us," said Ashley Kominar, a mother of three whose husband lost his job in the mines. "But I know he has one and that's what counts."

The recovery from the Great Recession has left behind a lot of rural America. The Washington-based Economic Innovation Group found that half of the new business growth over the past four years was concentrated in just 20 populous counties, and three quarters of the nation's economically distressed ZIP codes are in rural areas.

The recovery meant little to workers in Hannibal, Ohio, where Chinese competition resulted in the loss of the largest employer, the Ormet aluminum plant.

And it meant little to students in Waukegan, Illinois; poor school districts had no way to make up funding losses when federal stimulus money dried up. So while the nearby Stevenson district spends close to \$18,800 per student, Waukegan spends about \$12,600. Its students must cope with a high school that is often badly maintained, where as many as 28 students share a single computer.

That Stevenson is mostly white and Waukegan is mostly minority should come as little surprise. The racial divide endures, at least in some part because minorities continue to be significantly underrepresented in Congress and nearly every state legislature, an AP analysis found. Thanks to gerrymandering and voting patterns, non-Hispanic whites make up a little over 60 percent of the U.S. population, but still hold more than 80 percent of all congressional and state legislative seats.

An example: African-Americans represent more than a fifth of Delaware residents, but for the past 22 years Margaret Rose Henry has been the state's only black senator.

"If there were more black elected officials, we would have a better chance to get something done," Henry says.

Much of this is not new. As much as Americans like to recall the past as a rosy Norman Rockwell illustration, they have been at odds from the start — thousands of British loyalists battled their revolutionary neighbors in the colonies, North and South went to war over race, labor and management fought for decades, often violently, and the Vietnam era was awash with vitriol.

If today's divisiveness is different, some say, perhaps it is because of a lack of leadership.

"Yes, America is great. It could be a lot better if the politicians weren't fighting each other all the time," says Rodney Kimball, a stove dealer in West Bethel, Maine.

Elvin Lai, a San Diego hotelier, says the voters themselves must accept much of the blame.

"I do believe that our political system is broken," he says. "I do believe that a person that is centered and is really there to bring the country together won't get the votes because they're not able to speak to the passionate voters who want to see change."

It's those passionate voters, after all, who cocoon themselves with the like-minded, watching Fox News if they lean right or reading Talking Points Memo if they're on the left. In their ideological segregation, their minds are not open to compromise.

## Standoff: 'It's a stunning victory for the defense'

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"It's stunning. It's a stunning victory for the defense," said Robert Salisbury, attorney for defendant Jeff Banta. "I'm speechless."

The U.S. Attorney in Oregon, Billy J. Williams, issued a statement defending the decision to bring charges against the seven defendants: "We strongly believe that this case needed to be brought before a Court, publicly tried, and decided by a jury."

The Oregon case is a continuation of the tense standoff with federal officials at Cliven Bundy's ranch in 2014. Cliven, Ammon and Ryan Bundy are among those who are to go on trial in Nevada early next year for that standoff.

While the charges in Oregon accused defendants of preventing federal workers from getting to their workplace, the case in Nevada revolves around allegations of a more direct threat: An armed standoff involving dozens of Bundy backers pointing weapons, including assault-style rifles, at federal Bureau of Land Management agents and contract cowboys rounding up cattle near the Bundy ranch outside Bunkerville.

Daniel Hill, attorney for Ammon Bundy in the Nevada case, said he believed the acquittal in Oregon bodes well for his client and the other defendants facing felony weapon, conspiracy and other charges.

"When the jury here hears the whole story, I expect the same result," Hill told The Associated Press in Las Vegas. Hill also said he'll seek his client's release from federal custody pending trial in Nevada.

U.S. Attorney Daniel Bogden in Nevada, however, said the acquittals in Portland should have no effect in the Las Vegas case. "The Oregon case and charges are separate and unrelated to the Nevada case and charges," Bogden said.

Ammon Bundy and his followers took over the Oregon bird sanctuary on Jan. 2. They



AP Photo/Don Ryan

**Defendant Shawna Cox speaks at left as supporters hug outside federal court in Portland Thursday. A jury exonerated brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy and five others of conspiring to impede federal workers from their jobs at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.**

objected to prison sentences handed down to Dwight and Steven Hammond, two local ranchers convicted of setting fires. They demanded the government free the father and son and relinquish control of public lands to local officials.

The Bundys and other key figures were arrested in a Jan. 26 traffic stop outside the refuge that ended with police fatally shooting Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, an occupation spokesman. Most occupiers left after his death, but four holdouts remained until Feb. 11, when they surrendered following a lengthy negotiation.

Federal prosecutors took two weeks to present their case, finishing with a display of more than 30 guns seized after the standoff. An FBI agent testified that 16,636 live rounds and nearly 1,700 spent casings were found.

During trial, Bundy testified that the plan was to take ownership of the refuge by occupying it for a period of time and then turn it over to local officials to use as they saw fit.

Bundy also testified that the occupiers carried guns because they would have been arrested immediately otherwise and to protect themselves against possible government attack.

The bird sanctuary takeover drew sympathizers from around the West.

It also drew a few protesters who were upset that the armed occupation was preventing others from using the land. They included Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, who called the acquittals disturbing.

"The Bundy clan and their followers peddle a dangerous brand of radicalism aimed at taking over lands owned by all of us. I worry this verdict only emboldens the kind of intimidation and right-wing violence that underpins their movement," Suckling said.

One of Ammon Bundy's attorneys, Morgan Philpot, had a different perspective after watching Mumford get tackled by marshals. "His liberty was just assaulted by the very government that was supposed to protect it, by the very government that just prosecuted his client — unjustly as the jury found."

There's another Oregon trial coming up over the wildlife refuge.

Authorities had charged 26 occupiers with conspiracy. Eleven pleaded guilty, and another had the charge dropped. Seven defendants chose not to be tried at this time. Their trial is scheduled to begin Feb. 14.

Associated Press writers Andrew Selsky in Salem and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas contributed.

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