

# OPINION

## It Doesn't Have to Be 'Us' vs. 'Them'

### Building unity with shared values

BY ISAAH J. POOLE

It's increasingly easy to believe that our country is irreconcilably divided. But that's not quite the America that Michael Morrill saw from his perch in Reading, Penn. the weekend before the Republican convention in Cleveland.

Morrill, the executive director of Keystone Progress, was coordinating several "doorstep conventions" in Pennsylvania that weekend — not big gatherings in expensive halls, but one-on-one conversations at the homes of likely voters about the issues that concern them.

Many of these conversations were with the kind of white working-class voters that Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is relying on to carry him into the White House in November. But Morrill was surprised by what he heard.

"We had planned to find a lot of Trump voters," he said, even in the mostly Democratic enclaves of Reading, Erie, and



Lancaster that are home to many of the kinds of voters Trump is targeting. "To our surprise, we found no one who was a registered Democrat who was voting for Donald Trump."

That flies in the face of some conventional wisdom that white working-class voters in particular, devastated by the 2008 financial crash under President George W. Bush and left behind by the anemic recovery under President Obama, are united behind Trump's willingness to blame their plight on immigrants and other marginalized groups.

Instead, organizers found, people were receptive to the idea that it was decades of corporate-friendly economic policies in Washington — not neighbors who don't look like them — that had made it harder to make a living.

In the New Jersey communities of Hackensack and Teaneck, canvassers and the residents they visited traded stories about their struggles supporting their households. As one canvasser put it, they shared the same conclusion: "It shouldn't be this hard." That opened the door to conversations about the family-friendly policies they should be fighting for

together.

Almost 1,800 such door-to-door sessions took place in 15 states around the country, organized by People's Action, Center for Community Change Action, MoveOn.org, and more than a dozen local organizations.

LeeAnn Hall, co-director of People's Action, explained the initiative as an effort to get "neighbors having conversations with neighbors" about "a real economic agenda that takes power from corporations and wealthy elites and puts it back in the hands of the people."

"We can't solve the serious problems facing our country with more division and more hate," she said.

In Maryland, the door knockers talked to voters about particular county and state issues, such as a Howard County voter initiative for publicly funded small-donor elections that supporters tout as a model for statewide reform, said Larry Stafford, the director of Progressive Maryland.

In white working-class suburbs of Detroit, many of the doorstep conversations centered around race. Here, as in Pennsylvania, canvassers were surprised by what they discovered.

"We didn't expect those con-

versations to be easy," said Batosz Kumor, a Polish immigrant who works with a group called Michigan United. But he said he believed the conversations were necessary because "one of the major impediments to deep transformation in the American economy and politically is that we've been running away from conversations about race."

Even though he encountered views about race that were at odds with his own view of how structural racism permeates American society, he said he was surprised by how constructive some of his encounters were.

Doorstep convention organizers are now comparing notes from the people they met and planning more door-knocking campaigns.

But one lesson is already clear: The antidote to the overheated politics of us-against-them — especially when "us" and "them" are both prey to exploitation and deprivation by corporate predators — is getting people to talk to each other about a progressive agenda that unites and lifts up people based on the struggles and hopes they share.

Isaiah J. Poole is the online communications director at Campaign for America's Future.

## Converting from Hate to Peace and Justice

### Some measures to slow down a runaway train

BY TOM H. HASTINGS

With our daily news running to atrocity after tragedy, Americans are frightened and angry. Some are resonating with hate talk radio hosts like Rush Lim-



baugh or quintessentially enraged TV bloviators like Bill O'Reilly. This gets them pushed toward candidates who use the same or similar self-righteous militarized rhetoric. It paints Americans as victims, the system as rigged against us, and the world full of ungrateful evil misfits who unjustly hate and attack us.

This strand of candidate sees its exemplar in Donald Trump, of course, but the angry white man rhetoric runs like a bright red thread throughout the entire

rightwing side of the American political landscape. The risible reaction from Paul Ryan to overt racism, when he builds at least a good portion of his career and base on covert, dog-whistle structural racism, should tell us something.

But can we imagine a solution that does not involve even more hyper-militarization than we already see, with the US attacking in at least eight countries around the world, against whomever it likes, at will? Can we foresee a day when our paychecks are not shredded by Pentagon expenses that gobble up half our tax dollars every year?

In my field of conflict transformation we can envision a conversion to that world, that structure, that social civilization that spends its resources on life-affirming goods and services, that has a robust safety net for all, and that draws no hatred from those who live in other places of the world. That vision is only a

fantasy unless we offer realistic steps to achieve it, of course, so that is what we study, research, and teach.

Frankly, we are barreling down the tracks on a runaway militarized train of hatred and fear right now, so our first baby steps are needed to slow, stop, and ultimately change course onto a much better track, the track of peace and justice.

To begin, we might do best by taking these measures:

-Increasing funding and emphasis on research to determine both anecdotally and empirically the salient characteristics of a society that has strong indicators of social justice, civil discourse, peaceful relations with others, prosperity for most, and citizen satisfaction.

-Begin pilot projects that experiment with incorporating the findings of such research into portions of our American culture.

-Begin decreasing our heavy dependence on global military

dominance and start shifting to projects that feature collaboration rather than fierce and forceful competition.

None of these changes are major and all could inform us about the possibilities. The good news is that research already exists that can help us take these steps with confidence and success. Then, as we see the relative benefits and low comparative costs, we can make additional informed decisions.

Right now, sadly, we are racing to the bottom. Before we hit it, and please understand that the bottom is the use of nuclear weapons by a US President acting while full of irrational blind hatred, can we access our big human brains that know how to imagine, to dream, to create workable new paths to peace and prosperity? It is truly up to us.

Tom H. Hastings is founding director of PeaceVoice and assistant professor of conflict resolution at Portland State University.



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