

Opinion **US politics & policy**

Sticks and stones will break America unless we use our words

For reds and blues to listen to each other, they first need to be heard themselves

PATTI WALDMEIR



A protester hits the shields of National Guard troops as they block the road to Mount Rushmore on July 3 © Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty

Patti Waldmeir 4 HOURS AGO

“People need to be heard before they can hear,” says April Lawson, director of debates for Braver Angels, previously known as [Better Angels](#). It is a grassroots group which tries to get Americans to do what they least want to do right now: listen to opponents across the political divide and entertain the notion that the other side can’t be wrong about everything.

Recently, Braver Angels hosted such a [debate](#) on whether to “defund” American police, a campaign that took off after the police killing of George Floyd in May. This is not an easy time to get “reds” (Republicans) to debate with “blues” (Democrats) on such an issue without calling each other racists or anarchists — but 600 of them managed it, at least for a couple of hours on Zoom.

Ms Lawson was there as moderator, valiantly trying to get participants to open their ears by first allowing them a safe space to open their mouths. That space is particularly valuable these days to reds, many of whom feel that they can no longer speak up without being automatically labelled racists. “You cannot say the right thing right now,” says Karen Ward, a retired police officer and Donald Trump supporter who spoke against the defund motion in the debate.

On virtually every topic now, both sides are certain they are right. Many reds are sure that wearing a mask to combat Covid-19 is unnecessary, unmanly or un-American; many blues believe reds are risking lives if they don’t mask up. Many reds think defunding the police is the stupidest idea they’ve heard since the last time they listened to former Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders; many blues think social justice cannot be achieved without it.



Mr Trump arrives for the Independence Day events at Mount Rushmore © Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty

My countrymen couldn’t even agree on whether to celebrate July 4. President Trump celebrated by freeing his supporters from social distancing at Mount Rushmore, while some blue activists said Independence Day should not be celebrated until America frees itself from systemic racism, and protests were held on the day in [more than a dozen cities](#), including Washington.

Both sides also seem very sure that if they win the November presidential election it will prove that their party was right, and force the losers to come over to the correct side of history. I am just as sure that will not happen.

Which is why I'm so glad that Braver Angels is still trying to get reds and blues to open their mouths and ears on touchy topics. According to a recent Pew Research Centre [poll](#), nearly three-quarters of Americans are angry: in Michigan, a white woman was [arrested](#) last week after she pulled a gun on a black mother and her daughters in a car park. "Being able to talk about our most serious issues without shaming each other . . . is the only way this will ever work," says Ms Lawson.

Derek Steele, an African American social justice activist, tried hard to talk to reds without shaming them in the debate. "We need to fund projects that are beneficial to the community. [The things we're] asking for aren't unusual or unique, we're actually asking for the treatment to happen the same way in our communities as in white communities . . . [even] the way police show up for them," he said. But whites should not be shamed for living in what he called "wilful ignorance" of police brutality. "It's not your fault, if you've never had to deal with these things, how would you know what it's like?"

"Police and their role and responsibility looks different depending which side of the coin you're on. For white folks, fear pops up because they use police for protection and for low-level crimes, but the police force is violent in and towards my community. When we say 'defund', it's so that money can go to things that counter violence."

Ms Ward, speaking against the defund motion, said it "gives me a lump in the pit of my stomach". In a case of domestic violence, she asked, "The public wants to send what? A family counsellor?"

"There's something liberating about saying, 'We don't agree about this'," says Ms Lawson.

If we stop talking to those we disagree with, then sticks and stones will quickly replace nasty words. If only one side can be heard, only one side will be able to hear — and I worry what that deafness will mean for us all.

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