

United We Fall, Divided We Stand

By

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The familiar phrase, “united we stand, divide we fall,” has been around at least as far back as when Aesop used it as the moral of his story about the Four Oxen and the Lion. The oxen survive the lion’s frequent attacks by turning their tails to one another so that whichever way it approaches, it’s met by their horns. But after quarreling amongst themselves and separating, the lion soon puts an end to all of them.

The moral of this story has been used ever since to encourage unity, especially among groups, large and small, struggling together for some common cause like war, national freedom, individual freedom, labor rights, voting rights, and so forth. The idea is sometimes attributed to Abraham Lincoln who once gave a speech in which he quoted the *Gospel of Mark*, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” A similar verse in *Matthew* says, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.” These verses show this assumption that people must be united if they are going to endure is ancient and widespread.

It’s a powerful idea, but, paradoxically, it is almost always used to encourage solidarity among one group by being divided against another. It is a call for unity among insiders by dividing against outsiders. It is the idea that those who are not for us are against us. So, it isn’t really about the greater principle of unity but about struggling together against a common foe.

Such unity needs an enemy and is, thus, rooted in division and, with such a limited purpose, any unity resulting from such motivation will be temporary. Once the common threat ends the unity will end with it, and the group that had been held together by the threat will start to separate; perhaps to the point of smaller internal groups uniting to stand against those with whom they had once been united.

Just a few weeks ago, Justin Trudeau, Canada’s Prime Minister since 2015, announced his impending resignation. Trudeau, leader of the nation’s Liberal Party, had become extremely unpopular and the polls indicated the strong likelihood that Canada would elect its own version of a Donald Trump-like conservative populist in Trudeau’s place. But in just a short time, after Trump’s insulting remarks and attacks on their sovereignty and economy, Canadians have become unified around their national identity, with their chief nemesis being the American President and his government. Fed up with Trump and anyone who thinks, talks, or acts like him, has flipped the polls, which almost assure the next Canadian Prime minister will be from the Liberal Party. The question is, what happens to their sense of unity and nationalism if and once the Trump-threat ends? Will Canadian society return to the kind political division that is typical of most Western nations these days?

United we stand, divided we fall, also implies that to be united, everyone must be on the same page. They must agree and think alike. It is a call for authoritarianism and groupthink. “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided

against itself will not stand." When played out, this has historically meant there must be a head of the household, a chain of command, a sovereign authority who cannot be questioned. "Hail to the King!" Under such circumstances, we will lose the right to think and speak and act for ourselves either by fear and force—as is the case in Putin's Russia and with Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un of North Korea—or worse, by choice, because, in order to feel we belong and are part of something larger than ourselves, we simply stop thinking for ourselves and blindly and cultishly follow and obey whoever is in charge.

There is something instinctive in us that wants to join with others by becoming obedient, just as we are trained and taught from the very beginning to obey our parents, listen to our teachers, follow the rules, and abide by the laws. This is how we can ensure we will be loved and rewarded and accepted by others and our society. In his book *On Disobedience*, social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote, "The child just 'expresses himself.' But, from the first day of his life onward, he is filled with an unholy respect for conformity, with the fear of being 'different,' with the fright of being away from the rest of the herd."¹

If most of the rules imposed upon us in childhood are with the intention of keeping us safe from harm—be they legitimate, like "look both ways before crossing the street," or foolishness, "Believe in Jesus our you will go to Hell"—then we are also likely grow to believe that doing what is expected of us will keep us safe and guarantee our place in society. But this type of unity with others is a double-edged sword because it requires us to relinquish our power to think and to question; "freedom and the capacity for disobedience are inseparable,"² Fromm said, and "At this point in history the capacity to doubt and to disobey may be all that stands before a future for mankind and the end of civilization."³

Perhaps we see such an end happening today in the good old USA, which contains the principle of unity within its very name, yet also refers to the maintenance of, now, fifty separate states—the United States of America. These fifty states, further, and the country they belong to, are considered separate from 35 other countries that are also in America, which, together, contain nearly 15 percent of the world's population. The United States of America represents just over 4 percent of the world's total population. Yet we have chosen a xenophobic and authoritarian leader who promises America first, just 4.3 percent of the population first, even at the exclusion of those outsiders who were only a few days ago among our greatest allies.

It has become difficult to believe that the *United States* of America has ever been sincerely devoted to the principle of unity. It has a 250-year history, rather, of fighting to separate or to maintain its separation. It has succeeded best at this when facing a common external foe, proving victorious in the American Revolution, two world wars, and the threat of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War. But it has also been torn apart with much civil unrest, including a brutal Civil War, and today continues to experience domestic conflict and terrorism over its old patterns of segregation and inequalities based on race, sex, and class. And because other people who share this same continent have sought to come to the USA in pursuit of a better life, maintaining the integrity of its borders has remained a constant

struggle, so worrisome to some that it was a major reason Donald Trump was elected to a second term as the nation's President. He was elected, that is, based on his promise to segregate us from the world, not upon the principle of Unity, unless it is merely to be united with him by giving him our minds and our wills, which he commonly refers to as a "love fest."

The historic struggle between state rights and federal authority has also escalated since this grand experiment was launched in 1776, when its citizens successfully united against British rule. The U.S. Constitution is a delicate agreement protecting the rights and a certain degree of autonomy from the federal government. States can choose their own kind of government and any powers not given to the federal government are also reserved for the states. And each state, no matter how small its population, has the same number of US Senators, allowing those representing a minority to ban together and overrule those representing a majority of the nation's citizens. There were only thirteen states when this agreement was made. Today there are fifty, which means we now are a nation of fifty different governments, one nation with multiple dividing lines.

During his inaugural speech in 1980, President Ronald Reagan, the man who had been elected to run the Federal Government, said, "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." The Republican party has ever since worked to weaken federal programs and regulations, to reduce taxes, and to prevent spending on most new programs, no matter how vital they are to the welfare and protection of ordinary citizens, as well as of our states.

The US has the most expensive healthcare system on the planet, despite millions of its citizens remaining under-insured or completely uninsured. Despite being the second largest producer of greenhouse gases in the world, though less than five percent of the global population, the US has done little to nothing to address this existential threat. Today, in just his first weeks back in office, President Trump's actions have been directed toward the sole purpose of dismantling the federal government by firing millions of federal employees across the board and attempting to weaken or entirely eliminate some agencies, from USAID, the agency responsible for helping those outside the US borders, to the Education Department, which assures public schools are following the laws meant to protect students and teachers from discrimination and that guarantee education for those with disabilities, among other responsibilities. Trump even wants to eliminate paper straws and return to plastic straws; further thumbing his nose at even the smallest attempt to protect our planet and our nation from the terrible impacts of climate change that every State in the US is now experiencing.

All of this suggests that including the principle of unity in the US's very name is more about maintaining its separation from the rest of the world. Today, as the White House eviscerates federal programs and threatens to withhold assistance to those states whose governments it disagrees with, the States of America may have to find novel ways to fend for themselves. For futurist Paul Saffo, a technology forecaster, and Consulting Professor in the School of

Engineering at Stanford University, this situation has long been foreseeable. During a 2007 lecture, for example, Saffo predicted that, “There's less than a 50 percent chance that the United States will exist by the middle of this century.” I heard him repeat this claim myself during a more recent 2020 lecture. I won't go into his reasons for this forecast now but will only point out that it is now 2025, which means, if he is correct, we should be seeing the signs of its demise right now. I'll leave it up to you to determine if we are or not.

The point I want to make now is that its demise will not be from its lack of unity, but because of its lack of diversity; its unwillingness, that is, to tolerate differences. That's what's driving us apart. For a nation, a group, even a family endures by tolerating its differences, not by forcing everyone to agree and obey and by excluding or punishing those who don't.

In recent years, however, I've been surprised by how intolerant even many of liberals are toward the idea tolerance. On the hand, we now have those on the extreme left attacking the reputations, character, motives, and even the livelihoods of anyone who questions their ideas and particular approaches to social justice. They use *ad hominem* fallacies rather than engage in rational discussions about their claims—probably because their claims are not logically defensible to begin with. On the other hand, there are those who complain that tolerance doesn't go far enough; that we must love one another and fully embrace our differences. In my view this is also an irrational view. Why? Firstly, there are eight billion people in the world making it impossible for anyone to have the time to fully understand where every person they encounter is coming from. Secondly, how can we be expected to fully embrace every belief we encounter, even if we could understand everyone? I need only cite the examples of Nazism, White Nationalism, Scientology, reducing inflation with tariffs, and using plastic straws to make the point. There is good reason not to embrace many, perhaps most, of the ideas we encounter—because they are bad ideas!

It should be remembered that the principle of tolerance, which means living peacefully among those with whom we differ, is one of the few defining principles of liberalism. It is difficult to claim we are liberal if we are not in support of tolerance. Although the saying “live and let live” has much earlier roots, for example, it only became prominent in English during the Enlightenment, when liberalism was born.

Prior to this, tolerance was considered a bad word, even a crime to utter. Throughout most of human history, and, sadly, in much of the world today, people have believed that holding different beliefs would lead to civil unrest and conflict, and that calling for tolerance is akin to disloyalty and a call for anarchy. It has been only after long periods of brutality and bloodshed during failed attempts to maintain but one idea that some have dared to utter this forbidden word—tolerance. The Unitarians were ahead of the curve, becoming the first religion in history to enact a religious tolerance law, the Edict of Torda in 1568, during the Renaissance. Sadly, the Unitarian King of Transylvania who enacted this edict, died soon thereafter. The Catholics then took his throne and passed an anti-innovation law, making it illegal to express any new religious ideas, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of

Unitarian Bishop Francis David, architect of the Edict of Torda. He died in the dungeon beneath the Castle of Deva only six months later. It would be another century, during the Enlightenment, that societies and nations would reconsider the taboo notion of tolerance.

In the U.S., this eventually resulted in its own such edict, the First Amendment of its Constitution, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” 175-years later, this principle would be reiterated and expanded in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning discriminatory practices in employment and ending segregation in public places such as swimming pools, libraries, and public schools. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed, banning discriminatory practices that prevented black people from voting, especially in the southern states. Later still, in response to the assassination of Dr. King, another such law was enacted prohibiting discrimination in housing based on race, religion, sex, national origin, or disability.

Notice that all of these efforts to create a tolerant society began with laws, not love. During a 1965 speech at UCLA, Dr. King said,

It may be true that you can't legislate integration, but you can legislate desegregation. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also.

That's what makes tolerance such an important and practical principle, because it can be enforced. It is a social tool meant to keep the peace, even if we don't understand nor love nor even like each other. Over time, as we find ourselves living in the same neighborhoods, going to the same schools, shopping in the same stores, eating in the same restaurants, drinking from the same fountains, and working together in the same places, we will discover our differences aren't very important and that, as human beings, we all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, and that we have far more in common than not. Hopefully, over time, we will even befriend and love one another. But such love is not required. We just have to live and let live. We only have to tolerate each other. In a world of differences, toleration is far more useful and practical than love, as proven by the failure of Christianity to establish Heaven on Earth after 2,000 years of claiming that God is love and we must love one another.

In his 2006 book, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, Tzvetan Todorov says that during the European Age of the Enlightenment, “the status of our differences were taken as a basis of unity,” not “isolating one attribute to impute to all.”

This could be done by fostering tolerance and emulation, the free exercise of the critical spirit, and the self-detachment that enables individuals to see things from another's standpoint and attain thereby a level of generality that includes both viewpoints.⁴

Yet, he goes on to remind us,

This understanding was not a gift from heaven; it came with a high price tag: before being the continent that embodies tolerance and mutual recognition, Europe was the site of painful divisions, murderous conflicts and incessant wars. This long experience etched in its memory, in its narratives, in its buildings and even in its landscapes, is the tribute it had to pay to be able to benefit, many years later, from peace.⁵

After visiting Enlightened England, Voltaire once remarked, “Were there but one religion in England, its despotism would be fearful; were there but two they would cut each other's throats; but there are 30 and they live in peace and happiness.”⁶ In contrast, Todorov notes that China, once inventive and creative, was thwarted by the emergence of one unified empire “where minds were dulled by the uncontested reign of authority.”⁷ Contrary to the old saying, he says, “Here it is in division that there is strength.”⁸

All of this leads me to me to me to my main point, that we must flip the script. It is not by being united that we stand, but by being divided; by recognizing and accepting, that is, that we live in a world of differences—and it is our ideas of unity, and sameness, and, worse, our attempts to force everyone around us to accept our ideas and beliefs about truth, politics, religion, justice, and so forth, that produce hate and hostility, conflict and injustice, and that prevents us from progressing and achieving humanity's greatest potential.

Dr. King did not dream of a world were we all march lockstep—like some great military force directed by one command, one mind, one “uncontested reign of authority.” He understood that we must join hands and walk together with those who are different from us if we are truly going to progress and establish a more peaceful and just society and world for everyone. He understood that the rigidity that comes with unity eventually cause a society to shatter, as is happening today; and that it is only by accepting our differences, by tolerating one another, and to live and live, think and let think, speak and let speak, that we shall prosper and endure.

¹ Fromm, Erich, *On Disobedience*, Harper Perennial, New York, NY, 2010, p.23.

² Ibid, p. 9.

³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴ Todorov, Tzvetan, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, Atlantic Books, London, 2006, p. 145.

⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

⁷ Ibid., p. 136.

⁸ Ibid.