

# The Dream of a Compassionate and Just America

## Deferred for Now but Not Forever

### July 2012

Recently, on CNN's Sunday morning financial show, "Your Money", CNN contributor Will Cain commented that contemporary American politics is partisan perhaps beyond anything that we have ever seen in the history of the country, because the country itself is more divided along partisan and ideological lines than ever before. I agree with Mr. Cain. In my view, that division is severe. It is stark. It is absolute, representing, indeed, two fundamentally different Americas.

One America is a country in which the citizenry believes that health care is a basic human right. For that reason, the profit motive has been fully extricated from the provision of health care to human beings, making it a nation in which every person has access to quality, affordable health care. In this America, women have the right to make personal choices about pregnancy. It is a nation that embraces the necessity of public policy which supports families that are unable to do so on their own, in taking care of their loved ones who have disabilities.

This is an America in which although people are paid differently based upon gender for doing the same or comparable work, the people support laws designed to end that disparity as quickly as possible. The society understands the need to and is seriously working on the present day vestiges of the country's history of racial discrimination. Public discourse about racism and all other "isms" is regarded as both therapeutic and necessary for the nation to emotionally, psychically and spiritually heal from that history.

In this America, people live comfortably in communities with their gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and queer neighbors, and LGBTQ citizens have the same legal rights in employment, housing, education, and every other aspect of life as heterosexual citizens. All couples have the legal right to marry.

Financial and all other private industries are regulated for the protection of ordinary citizens. Corporations do business in the United States because their management feels a deep civic and moral responsibility to provide employment in the country which made it possible for them to produce their wealth. They know that while in doing business in the United States, they will not be as wealthy as they would be were they to conduct their business in a developing country, they will still be **very** wealthy and for them, that is wealthy enough. Greed does not blind them to the suffering of working Americans and to the good of the nation

In this America, the people desire a fair and balanced distribution of resources based on compassion, effort and hard work. Those who have more, are happy to give more.

This is an America in which crime, drug abuse and addiction are dealt with by working on their root causes. It is a nation in which the purpose of incarceration is to provide to the incarcerated, an opportunity to be rehabilitated through counseling, and educational and vocational training. In this America, people want as few guns as possible in society, with all of them, being in the hands of law enforcement officers.....and those officers see and treat **all** people equally.

Providing accessible quality education to children and young adults is believed to be one of the most important ingredients necessary for a healthy and secure national future. Thus, education is generously and wisely funded as one the nation's highest priorities.

Public employees - teachers, police officers, fire fighters, transportation workers and others, are highly valued for their public service and for that reason, are also compensated well. Their bargaining units are respected and dealt with in an equitable and professional manner by government officials.

This country has a Department of Defense **and** a Department of Peace. Foreign policy is pursued in a rational, informed manner. War is avoided whenever possible, with an understanding that it is **always** possible.

The safety of the nations' infrastructure, its roads, bridges, and tunnels is a national priority and are thus kept safe for Americans. New innovations in travel such as high speed rail, are pursued and developed, both keeping America current in the world and providing hundreds of thousands of jobs to Americans.

In this America, the populace is supportive of research and development of clean renewable forms of energy, wind, solar and hydro power. The findings of the scientific community are not only taken seriously, they are actively sought by politicians for serious consideration in making policies that affect the health of the planet.....and those politicians legislate based upon that science.

Citizens are encouraged to vote and to participate in the political process to the fullest extent. Public discourse on radio and television elevates comprehension of social issues and results in greater understanding of and thus compassion for all of one's fellow citizens. In this nation, political campaigns are publicly funded so that in elections, those with excessive **means**, will not have excessive **influence**. This America elects to public office, people who have open minds and are committed to working on behalf of the public good. Its politicians, regardless of whether they are of a different political party than the President, or disagree with her policies, nonetheless have absolute respect for the office of the President, the country's chief elected official.

Now for the **other** America.

The other America is one in which the Federal government believes that health care is a right for those who can afford to pay for it. In this America, even if the Federal government through some fluke, decided to provide a program to assist individuals and families with acquiring health insurance, many governors would refuse to **participate** in that program, and would do so **regardless** of the facts that thousands of their states' citizens cannot afford and therefore do not have health care, and that a large percentage of those same citizens have not received medical attention for years. The unspoken belief in **this** America is that if you're poor, you shouldn't get sick. Period.

In **this** America, the government has dictated that when women get pregnant, they give birth - **every** time, even if their pregnancy resulted from rape or incest and **even** if it puts the woman's life at risk. **All** forms of contraception are illegal. The rules for women in this America are that if you have sex, or are raped, you get pregnant, and if you get pregnant, you give birth. There is no choice, and there are no exceptions.

This is an America that embraces the philosophy that families should take care of loved ones who have disabilities and that the government has no role to play in this regard. Thus, it makes no provision for persons with disabilities who either do not have families, or whose families

cannot afford their care. As a result, millions of its citizens who have mental disabilities, specifically, live on the streets and under bridges.

In this America, people judge anyone who isn't heterosexual as being morally aberrant and thus does not welcome them into their communities, discriminates against them in every aspect of life, and forbids them the legal right to marry.

Men are paid more than women, but when governmental officials at the highest ranks are asked if they approve of legislative attempts to address the disparity, they are non-committal. Affirmative Action and other societal attempts to dismantle present-day vestiges of past discrimination are seen as "reverse discrimination" and are therefore outlawed. Discussions about how the "isms" and the discrimination that results from them affect the lives of those who are their targets, are viewed as attempts to make people "politically correct" and described as "playing the \_\_\_\_card". People who are members of groups that have been historically discriminated against are told to get over it.

In this America, financial industries are virtually unregulated, resulting in a housing crisis and economic recession so severe, that hundreds of thousands of families lose their homes, jobs and life savings due to reckless market speculation. All other private industries are also regulated as little as possible, even if the safety of the nation's air, food, water, medicine, pesticides, cars, airplanes, toys, electronics, and anything else made by those industries, is greatly diminished, causing the illness, injury and death of thousands. Owners of corporations engage in an endless effort to amass endless wealth, and for that reason, send jobs to whichever countries allow them to conduct business cheapest, regardless of the impact of that practice on American workers and thus on American society as a whole.

In this America, the fact that nearly all the national wealth resides in the hands of a very small and powerful minority is simply seen as the natural result of a competition based capitalist system. Those who have more, want more, even at the expense of those who have nothing and of the national good. A decades-long pattern of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer is seen as simply a natural consequence of the hard work of the few as compared to the laziness of the many.

Crime, drug abuse and addiction are dealt with in this America by locking up increasing numbers of people. Many states have "three strikes and you're out" laws that result in the mass incarceration of society's most disenfranchised. This is an America in which rehabilitation is considered naïve and thus, a waste of tax dollars. The purpose of incarceration is to punish. At the end of their sentences, many prisoners are therefore released back into society more inclined toward crime than they were **before** their incarceration.

The citizens of this America want anyone who wants to own a gun, to be able to purchase and to openly carry it on their person. They are utterly tone deaf to the consistent pleas of law enforcement organizations across the country which declare that the country needs stricter gun laws because they, law enforcement, are being outgunned by average citizens who collectively possess more automatic weapons than they do. In this America, massacre after **massacre after massacre** occurs, in places of employment, in houses of worship, in shopping malls, in high schools, on college campuses, at gatherings of local politicians in front of neighborhood supermarkets.....and in movie theaters, but none of that matters. A very powerful gun lobby has convinced the politicians that no matter what happens, people kill people and guns do not.

Because politicians don't believe that education is important for the wellbeing of the nation's future, it is minimally funded by the government. For that reason, quality education is available to only those who can afford it.

Public employees, teachers, police officers, fire fighters, transportation workers and others, are seen as lazy, undeserving, overpaid drags on the public dole who have outrageous retirement benefits. As a consequence, their numbers are kept at a minimum, their working conditions are poor, they are underpaid and overworked, their pensions are slashed and governors attempt to strip them of their right to collectively bargain.

This America has a Department of Defense but finds the idea of a Department of Peace, utterly laughable. Foreign policy is pursued through lies and disinformation campaigns that result in wars which lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens of foreign lands and thousands of American service men and women.

The safety of the nations' infrastructure, its roads, bridges, and tunnels is not **low** on the national priority list, it isn't on the list at all. The results, among others, is that bridges in major metropolitan areas crossed by millions of commuting citizens each year, deteriorate, crack and fall into a river below. Water mains in city after city break, wreaking havoc on numerous communities. The nation's aging electrical grid becomes increasingly vulnerable to terrorist attack. It's decaying nuclear power plants which remain in operation well beyond their intended lifespan, become ticking time bombs for unspeakable, unimaginable disaster. While other nations are developing high speed rail, the American passenger rail system is rapidly becoming a slow, inefficient, outdated relic of the past which rents the railroads it uses from the freight rail companies that own them.

In this America, the government is not supportive of research into and the development of clean renewable forms of energy. Powerful oil, gas and coal companies reign supreme citizens in coal-rich states strongly support the search for more and more dirty energy with chants of "Drill Baby Drill!", which they learned from politicians. Science is manipulated to fit the government's intended outcome in scientific controversies, including that of determining whether climate change is a reality. When not manipulated, scientific findings are either denied or are simply ignored.

The government enacts legislation regarding voter registration requirements which disproportionately disenfranchise people of color, young people and poor people. In one state of this America, gun registration identification satisfies the state's voter identification requirement but student identifications do not. In enacting such legislation, state governments blatantly and unapologetically attempt to rig the outcome of national, state and local elections in favor of the rich and the powerful. Indeed, politicians publicly brag about the strategy, "Voter ID, which is going to allow our guy to win this state - done."

This America is filled with television and radio hosts called "shock jocks", who use fear and hate to sew into the hearts of their listening audience, suspicion and hatred of those who are of a different political orientation. They tell their audience that they are looking out for their benefit, that they can trust only the news that they report, and that they cannot trust the government, the scientific community, the media and university education.

This America has politicians, including those running for the nation's highest office, who both believe and say that corporations are people. The Supreme Court rules that there are no limits

on the amount of corporate money allowed in political campaigns because **as** people, corporations have the right to freedom of speech. Also, the source of the limitless corporate money in politics need not be divulged. The American people have no right to know from where the money comes. It can remain secret.

This America elects to public office, people who arrive in Washington with their minds set on opposing and stopping in its tracks, **any and every** single that is suggested by the other party, including ideas which they themselves initially proposed. In this America, such politicians are totally willing to sacrifice the good of the country, including its international credit rating and even its security, for their own political purposes. They use the filibuster as a weapon to abruptly halt **any** legislation proposed by the other party, even if they **know** that that legislation will provide relief to millions of suffering Americans, especially if they believe that in so doing, the other party will be blamed for the lack of relief, thus helping to insure the victory of **their** political party in the next election.

If the president is not a member of their party, and/or they disagree with his policies, they simply openly and publicly disrespect him in any number of ways, including shouting at him during a state of the union address, "You lie!". They conduct a bogus national discourse on whether he is a native-born American citizen, a Muslim, a socialist or a communist. In this America, politicians who are not members of the president's party say that the president hates the United States, that he goes around the world apologizing for the country, and that he is downright dangerous to the American way of life, in fact, the greatest danger to the nation that has ever existed. They say that they know that in his heart, he is not an American, he's just not an American.

If the president is an American **of color**, his political opponents engage in disgusting racist attacks on him. If he is African American specifically, they post on the internet, pictures of the White House lawn as a watermelon patch. They describe him as the greatest food stamp president in American history. They say that he wants to turn the country into an enormous welfare state. They will say that he hates white people. If they disagree with his national health care plan, they hold demonstrations in which they carry signs of him wearing a grass skirt with a bone in his nose, beneath which appear the words, "Medicine Doctor." If he is bi-racial, with a European American mother and an African father, a U.S. judge will make a joke that his mother must have copulated with a dog.

I agree with Mr.Cain. We live in a **deeply** politically and ideologically divided nation. The extreme level of partisanship in the United States today is indicative of an American population which holds two essentially, dramatically, fundamentally, strikingly, undeniably, extraordinarily different views of the kind of country they want the United States of America to be. The first is the America of **my** dreams and that of millions of other liberals. It is the America that we **desperately** want. The second, is our nightmare. That second America, however, based upon their consistent words and actions, is apparently what many **conservatives** want. It is **their** dream, while liberal America's **dream** is their nightmare. The two Americas are so different that I sometimes think that maybe liberals and conservatives should each have their own America, that the only way to settle the differences in their dreams is to divide the country in half, giving conservatives one half and liberals the other. The line would be drawn roughly straight down the eastern border of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. <sup>1</sup> Then, if

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<sup>1</sup> As I live in and love the West, my personal preference would be for liberals to get all of the big, beautiful Western states. Conservatives, of course, would get the country's Eastern half. Since Sarah Palin is already in Alaska, they could have it as well. As one of the Earth's last true great wildernesses, Alaska would be a lot to give up, but if it

conservatives want to elect their Ronald Reagans, Sarah Palins, Allen Wests, Michelle O'Donnells, George W. Bushes, Herman Cains, Michelle Bachmans, Jan Brewers and Mitt Romneys, they can do so. We'll gladly take our John F. and Robert Kennedys, our Hubert Humphreys, our Shirley Chisholms, our Jimmy Carters, our Geraldine Ferraros, our John Lewises, our Bill and Hilary Clintons, our Al Gores, our Elijah Cummingses and our Barack Obamas. They can have their Clarence Thomases. We'll take our Thurgood Marshalls. They can have their Chris Christies. We'll take our Doug Wilders. They can have their Rush Limbaughs, and Bill Orielleys. We'll take our Gwen Ifills and Bill Moyerses. If they want guns to freely flow throughout society, if they want to de-fund education and social services, to privatize health care and de-regulate corporations, if they want to continue to use oil, gas, coal and nuclear energy for power, if they want to provide tax breaks shelters and havens to the wealthiest two percent of Americans while simultaneously blaming the poor for their economic predicament, and raising the tax burden on the working and middle classes, they will be perfectly free to do so in their America without dragging the rest of us with them.

To many, the suggestion of splitting up the country along partisan and ideological lines may sound appealing - live and let live - they'll go their way, we'll go ours. The only problem with it is that it isn't a solution at all. We are all, liberals and conservatives alike, so intricately intertwined with each other, our fates, our destinies so deeply interconnected, that we must together, find solutions to the very serious social and environmental issues that face us. After the split, the sick and the poor of conservative America will eventually begin coming to liberal America for their medicines and other health care needs. The pollution of the air, water and soil of conservative America will inevitably affect the air, water and soil of liberal America. After the virtually uninspected food and water of conservative America has become a risk to human life and health, many in that America, first and particularly the wealthy, will begin attempting to get their food and water from liberal America. The massive gun violence that will most assuredly plague conservative America will in time, begin to spill over into liberal America if for no other reason that many of those convicted of gun violence in conservative America will undoubtedly seek refuge in liberal America. As nearly impossible as it currently seems, conservatives and liberals must find answers to our societal challenges **together**. Dr. King expressed this profound truth as eloquently as I have **ever** heard it. Dr. King said that, "We must learn to live together as brothers (and sisters), or perish together as fools."

I may be called a bleeding heart liberal for desperately wanting the first America, but if being a bleeding heart liberal means that my heart bleeds for that second America, the America in which we actually live, I'll proudly wear the badge of bleeding heart liberal on my sleeve. I'll wear it as a badge of honor, for my heart **does** bleed for my country. It bleeds for what we **can** be, and for how dreadfully far away at this point in our history, we are **from** that kindler, gentler, wiser, more compassionate America. Nonetheless, my very strong faith is that we **will** get there eventually. Our dream is deferred for now, but not forever. My only hope is that we achieve the dream before we wreak much more havoc on both our psyches and to our precious planet.

My final thought is that many of the political tactics used by both the politicians and many of the members of the media of conservative America seem to a lot of us in liberal America, to be utterly tyrannical. I am completely confident, however, that **in time**, they **will** wake up from the nightmare and see the possibility of the true American dream. As Mahatma Gandhi so wisely

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meant that I could live in peace with others who share my world view, I would do it. Liberals, of course, would get Hawaii.

said, "There have been tyrants..... and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall - think of it, always."

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