

ASHLEY: When President Joe Biden took office, he said he wanted to unify Americans, to bring people together after years of sniping, division, and worse. But maybe unity is too much to expect right now. We may need to start with something more basic: ending the toxic polarization that keeps so many of us from understanding one another.

This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this episode, we speak to a leading expert in conflict resolution, who's advised the Biden campaign on how to bring Americans closer together, starting with a simple act: sitting down and listening.

ASHLEY: But Peter Coleman says time is of the essence, and the new administration needs to act now to take advantage of the current moment.

RICHARD: Peter is a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University. He's a mediator and the author of an upcoming book called *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*. Ashley, you kick us off.

ASHLEY: Peter, you use this term, toxic polarization. What is it?

PETER COLEMAN: In politics, there is a tendency for us to prefer to gather with people that are similar to us or be repulsed by or move away from those that are different from us. And in a two-party system like we have here, it's critically important that there be some degree of polarization and opposition so that you have traditionalists or more conservative folks and progressives or people that are embracing change and reform in conversation with each other. It's part of a healthy society.

But when it gets to this point where you have such deep enmity and hate and it's reinforced by these really parallel media echo systems that we have in this country, by internet sorting, by geographic sorting, when you have all of these factors that lead to these core emotional experiences of the Other as the problem, a sense of contempt for the Other and a sense of warmth and love for your own group, it can get toxic. When COVID, as a pandemic, doesn't unite the country together but becomes weaponized politically, or when wildfires on the West Coast don't unite communities to fight the wildfire but are weaponized politically and blamed on one side or the other, somebody's intentionally setting fires, these are the kinds of pathological dynamics that you see in societies that are so deeply polarized. So all of that adds up to a toxic state that is making us sick as individuals, as families, and as a nation.

RICHARD: What happened in America in the 1970s even into the 1980s? It seemed like our country was not that intensely divided, at least between Democrats and Republicans, and nothing like what it is today. Any thoughts about the reasons for this?

PETER COLEMAN: There are many theories as to what happened and who's responsible. For example, someone suggested that Reagan and the conservative

revolution that he brought forward, the Republican Party started to realize that their policies were not popular. So they started to cheat and started to basically try to suppress voting and gerrymander their way in. Some blame Newt Gingrich because Newt Gingrich came to Washington and did a kind of provocative thing. He was the Speaker of the House, and he changed the rules of Congress. So they went from a five-day work week to a three-day work week. What he said to his Republican colleagues in Congress was, "Don't move here. Don't bring your families here. Stay back in your states. You can come for three days and live in your office or live with other Republicans. Don't fraternize with the other side. This is all-out war."

So part of what he did in that gesture, whether it was intentional or not, in Washington, since the beginning of politics in Washington, you had politicians move to Washington or Maryland or nearby. Their kids grow up and go to school and play sports and theater and music with kids from politicians across the aisle. And you had these connections that basically allowed people to humanize each other. Once he removed those social structures, it became much easier to just vilify the other side, only see them on the floor of Congress, attack them. And that leads to autistic hostility and escalation. So all of these things had an impact.

ASHLEY: Just looking at the big picture for a minute, you've also said that scholars have studied years worth of data on how states interact with each other and fight and so on. They found that, most of the time, when states get into long-term conflict, that conflict was preceded by some kind of major political or cultural shock. Could that apply here, too?

PETER COLEMAN: One of the precursors of what happened in the late 1970s in America was the late 1960s and assassinations. There were several: Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, you name it. There were four or five assassinations. There was a cultural revolution. There were major legal—Roe v. Wade—legal precedents that took place. So there was tremendous cultural upheaval that took place in the late '60s, early '70s. And about 10 years later, you start to see this pattern of highly divisive conflicts that basically set the trajectory for which we're on today.

What that suggests is that the causes aren't necessarily always the things that you see happening at that time like Reagan, like what Newt Gingrich did. But there is a destabilization of what is the status quo, and that starts to bring about various changes, which at some point tip into a pattern that we then get stuck in.

ASHLEY: And talking of now, in his fairly recent inaugural address, Joe Biden talked a lot about finding unity among Americans. You say, actually, you shouldn't focus on unity. You should focus Americans' attention on the common foe of toxic polarization. Can you talk about that for a minute?

PETER COLEMAN: Yeah, and, again, I think it's very consistent with Joe Biden's person to want to unify and heal and be empathetic and show that, unlike Trump, he is not a divider, he is a uniter. So I get his approach. But what we know from the study of,

for example, post-conflict settings, is that you don't go into Angola or Rwanda after extremely difficult times and tell people to heal or to reconcile because they just have no patience for it. So, right now, we have at least half of this country that is furious and feels like this election was stolen, that their man lost and he should've won or, in fact, did win but it was stolen. And if that belief system is there, the idea of asking them to heal or asking Progressives, who, frankly, have been resentful and sitting on their hands for four years because of Trump, there is not much appetite at this point for unity or healing. There's appetite for a fight. So one way to focus that energy is to focus on a common enemy like the fact that this type of polarization is making us and our family and our children sick.

RICHARD: So what advice did you give to the Biden administration about repairing and reversing polarization and extremism?

PETER COLEMAN: I think there is a need to do many things, but what I've suggested is that, under the auspices of starting with the communities, that they do two things. One is what we call a Radical Listening Tour. One of the things that research has shown us is, in serious, intractable conflicts, when people start to feel hurt, particularly people who are marginalized and feel left behind and low-power, when they start to feel heard by those in authority, really listened to and responded to, it has a transformative effect on their attitudes.

So one of my recommendations is that they launch a Radical Listening Tour. In fact, a colleague of mine, David Carten, and I just published a piece in The Hill last week suggesting that the COVID vaccination rollout, which is this massive undertaking that is going to essentially every American adult and then, eventually, every American... I was vaccinated last week, and part of what happens when you get vaccinated is that you go into some place, and there's a lot of time standing in line. Then, eventually, you get vaccinated, and they ask you to sit down quietly for somewhere between 15 minutes and 30 minutes, depending on your underlying conditions. So people just sit there.

Our recommendation is this is a tremendous opportunity to listen to people, to say to them, "We're interested in hearing from you about how you're doing. What are your big concerns for you and your family? And what kinds of remedies do you want to see happen over the next few years that would really make a difference in your life?"

RICHARD: Should Joe Biden do that?

PETER COLEMAN: That's what we recommended, Joe Biden and the CDC. So take this as an opportunity to have trained listeners sit with them and hear them and start to document. If you can actually document what people are saying, their grievances, their ideas, then what you can start to do is parse that information locally and say, "Well, in this region, these are the top three things that people want to see happen." So it really is data collection, but it's also the power of listening and how that can be transformative if those in power actually hear you and respond. So my

recommendation is that you start with some kind of Radical Listening Tour. This would be one way to do that.

Then, in a year, in his State of the Union speech, he can say, "I have spent the last year sending out an army of folks to just listen to you, and this is what I've learned, and this is how I will respond." So it's not them coming up with some kind of Democratic, Progressive proposals that they're jamming down through Congress. It's them saying, "We've listened to you, and we've heard you. This is what we need to do."

ASHLEY: You're listening to Professor Peter Coleman on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. This week, we want to mention a podcast that I enjoy listening to, and I think you will, too. It's called Politics in Question, hosted by Lee Drutman, Julia Azari, and James Wallner, three lively experts on American politics and reform.

ASHLEY: Politics in Question is a weekly podcast about how political institutions are failing us and how to fix them. It's one of 15 podcasts that are, along with us, members of Democracy Group podcast network.

RICHARD: The latest episode of Politics in Question looks at Independent voters and how they influence American politics. They sat down with Yanna Krupnikov, a political science professor at Stony Brook University. She's researched political psychology, communication, and persuasion. It's a fascinating episode.

ASHLEY: Find out more by searching for Politics in Question or head to democracygroup.org. Now back to our interview with Peter Coleman here on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: You've worked as a mediator consulting with peacemakers and leaders after conflicts in various parts of the world, including the Middle East, Haiti, and Africa. What have you learned from this experience that perhaps is of real value now as we confront the levels of toxic polarization as a nation?

PETER COLEMAN: Well, it's a good question. In fact, I was having a conversation yesterday with someone from the UN who focuses a lot on UN mediators and what UN mediators do. And one of the things that I think we're learning from sending mediators into conflict settings to either make peace or try to build peace is that, oftentimes, they're highly ineffective. They're ineffective because they are only in there for a short period of time. They oftentimes don't have a nuanced understanding of the situation on the ground, politics, other actors working there. So they go in, and they do their best to try to craft a deal, and then they leave. And then you see a resurgence of conflict, and when that happens, things tend to really escalate.

So one of the things that we've found more and more is critical is not having external actors go into these situations but to identify who is already on the ground doing work. This is what we call positive deviance, that even in war settings, even in Kashmir in the Middle East or South Sudan, you have community groups that are already there that are doing good work and trusted, that are trying to keep the conversation going. They're best situated to make a difference and have an impact. That's true in the U.S., as well.

RICHARD: By external actors, you mean experts. You mean perhaps the man in the white coat or somebody from outside a local community parachuting in.

PETER COLEMAN: Yeah, like me. Yeah, exactly, like me or anyone else going in with what we know and what we think will help but not really having local context, experience, and expertise, particularly when you're going internationally. But this is a very eclectic country that we're in, America, and there are pockets of tremendous diversity, regional pockets here. So what I have recommended to the Biden administration is that, instead of bringing in external experts to analyze the problem and make recommendations for solutions, you identify those groups that are existing. There are, by some account, 5,000 different organizations that have multiple affiliate groups in communities across the country.

The way I think about them is that they are the immune system of communities. They're actively, today, working to bring people together, to build understanding, to fight hostility and antagonism, to clear up misunderstandings. If the government were to recognize them, support and encourage them in ways that are useful to them... The government shouldn't come up with a plan to help them. The government should go to them and say, "What do you need from us? How can we help you do what you do and scale up what you do better?" That's one way to basically help the system heal itself, help these communities and these actors that are already being effective in difficult circumstances, help them grow their capacities to heal.

ASHLEY: What are some ways to emerge from toxic polarization?

PETER COLEMAN: Here's the good news. The good news is that political shocks are destabilizing and can create opportunities for change. The change can be terrible, or the change can be promising. If you study these long-term difficult conflicts, somewhere between 75% and 90% of them also end within 10 years of political shocks. Guess what. We're in the midst of an incredibly shocking period, everything from the Trump administration's approach to governance to COVID to economic downturn to racial injustice spikes.

All of these things have come together to sufficiently destabilize America and Americans. There is an opportunity. There's a window here for things to get better. The other thing we've learned from studying international conflicts that end is that, when people are miserable... And we have seen a growing what they call "exhausted

majority" within the middle that are fed up, tired of this dysfunction, and really want something else.

RICHARD: Peter, there's an opportunity for groups such as ours, Common Ground Committee, and many other groups that are in this space to act. Is that what you're saying?

PETER COLEMAN: Yeah, absolutely, and there is an infrastructure there. There's an economy of bridge-building and decency that's there that needs to be supported. This is the time to do it because it takes time. The things that frustrate me about some attempts to bring people together to talk across their differences is that they don't respect the fact that, in climates like this, those are not simple conversations. These things are conversations that take time but oftentimes take facilitation and encouragement and support. And if those conditions are met, those conversations can be fantastic. It's a mistake at this point, I think, to say to people, "Reach out to somebody who's a... If you're an anti-Trumper, reach out to a pro person, and go have a cup of coffee." I think that's a big mistake because there are too many incidents where those things just blow up, make it worse, and people refuse to get back together again.

ASHLEY: Do you think the Biden administration's window of opportunity to reset the country is closing? How is it doing so far?

PETER COLEMAN: Yeah, I do think that time is of the essence. This is something that we know from the study of attempts at change, is that the early, initial conditions and gestures matter. I think what they're doing well is they're helping people right away, so passing a \$1.9 trillion COVID Relief Bill, getting money to all kinds of people, getting health care to all kinds of people, and showing competency around addressing COVID. The rollout of COVID since the Biden administration has gotten much more effective and efficient.

I think those things are fantastic even if they don't get bipartisan support, even these bills that are forced through with a slim majority. I still think they're getting the message to people that government can help, government matters, and that they care. But I think, in the long run, they're going to need to do more to hear from the public and to try to get at some of these underlying grievances that, frankly, both Trump and Bernie Sanders tapped into. There's tremendous resentment on the Left and the Right about inequality and bank bailouts. I think they have to listen to those grievances, and they have to respond to them directly, and time is of the essence around that.

RICHARD: You sound somewhat hopeful that we could be beginning soon to dig ourselves out from the weight of toxic polarization. But perhaps the reason is we're exhausted. We're fed up where we are right now. Is that a fair summary?

PETER COLEMAN: Yeah. I think our exhaustion is important because, again, there is so much energy for the fight, for the fight on the Left and fight on the Right. But

exhaustion will definitely dissipate that, and people will want something else, but they need to know what that is. They need to know that there is another way to engage, and that's why what I'm saying is there are people in your community that are having conversations across these divides that are constructive and helpful and that are then moving on to mobilize and do active things that will change your community. Find them, join them, because simply knowing that change is possible will help.

That's another thing we've learned from research in more intractable situations. If you believe that they'll never change, I'll never change, and the situation is stuck, then it will be. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. But if there's a possibility that some people will change, that their attitudes will change, their actions will change, and, in fact, I may even change, if you hold that possibility, you're much more likely to engage with the Other and try. If you see other people doing that and doing it in ways that are effective, you're much more inclined to join them.

ASHLEY: Are you more hopeful than worried about our future, or are you more worried than hopeful?

PETER COLEMAN: I'm high on both. I am worried. I watched January 6th unfold.

RICHARD: January 6th, the assault on the Capitol.

PETER COLEMAN: It was an interesting day because January 6th was the day that the votes were finally called in Georgia and the Capitol was stormed. So you had these... basically democracy working and democracy falling apart simultaneously. They're both hopeful moments. I do feel like this is a rare opportunity to reset America, and I think, in many ways, America is sick and needs a reset. So I'm hopeful that we can take advantage of that. I do think that the leadership in Washington today understands that.

The problem is that politics are broken, as well. Money in politics and just politics as war is part of it, and that's going to be a very difficult thing to change. Again, I'm optimistic that the Biden administration understands that and are amenable to change. I don't know how long that will last. If they keep getting opposition around every piece of legislation from the Republicans, they may just also go nuclear, get rid of the filibuster, and push everything through. I understand that, but I think it's a mistake because I think that they ultimately need to find some way to model for all of us that there is a different way to function.

RICHARD: The siren is blaring metaphorically and in fact. Peter Coleman, thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

PETER COLEMAN: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for having me, and let's stay in touch.

RICHARD: One of my favorite takeaways from this interview with Peter is his call for a Radical Listening Tour.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I love that idea. So often when we talk about finding common ground, it can be a call for compromise or being reasonable. But sometimes we just need to shut up and listen and really hear what other people not like us have to say.

RICHARD: That's our show for this time. We release new conversations and podcast episodes every two weeks on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: You can find more of our podcasts at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.