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When compromise seems immoral

by [Fareed Zakaria](#)

Wednesday's [shooting](#) at a congressional baseball practice was a ghastly example of the political [polarization](#) that is ripping this country apart. Political scientists have shown that Congress is more divided than at any time since the end of Reconstruction. I am struck not simply by the depth of partisanship these days, but increasingly also by its nature. People on the other side of the divide are not just wrong and to be argued with. They are immoral and must be muzzled or punished.

This is not about policy. The chasm between left and right during much of the Cold War was far wider than it is today on certain issues. Many on the left wanted to nationalize or substantially regulate whole industries; on the right, they openly advocated a total rollback of the New Deal. Compared with that, today's economic divisions feel relatively small.

Partisanship today is more about identity. Scholars [Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris](#) have argued that, in the past few decades, people began to define themselves politically less by traditional economic issues than by identity — gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation. I would add to this mix social class, something rarely spoken of in the United States but a powerful determinant of how we see ourselves. Last year's election had a lot to do with social class, with non-college-educated rural voters reacting against a professional, urban elite.

The dangerous aspect of this new form of politics is that identity does not lend itself easily to compromise. When the core divide was economic, you could split the difference. If one side wanted to spend \$100 billion and the other wanted to spend zero, there was a number in between. The same is true with tax cuts and welfare policy. But if the core issues are about identity, culture and religion (think of abortion, gay rights, Confederate monuments, immigration, official languages), then compromise seems immoral. American politics is becoming more like Middle Eastern politics, where there is no middle ground between being Sunni or Shiite.

I have seen this shift in the reactions to my own writing and my television show. When I started writing columns about two decades ago, the disagreements were often scathing but almost always about the substance of the issue. Increasingly there is little discussion about the substance, mostly ad hominem attacks, often involving my race, religion or ethnicity.

Today, everything becomes fodder for partisanship. Consider the now-famous production of the Public Theater's "Julius Caesar" in Central Park, in which Caesar resembles President Trump. Conservatives have pilloried the play, raising outrage among people who have never seen it, saying that it glorifies the assassination of a president, and seeking to defund the production. Since I tweeted a line praising the production, I've received a barrage of attacks, many of them quite nasty. In 2012, a production of the same play had an Obama-like Caesar being murdered nightly, and no one seemed to have complained.

In fact, the central message of "Julius Caesar" is that the assassination was a disaster, leading to civil war, anarchy and the fall of the Roman Republic. The assassins are defeated and humiliated and, racked with guilt, die horrible deaths. If that weren't clear enough, the Public Theater play's director, Oskar Eustis, has explained the message he intended to convey: "Julius Caesar can be read as a warning parable to those who try to fight for democracy by undemocratic means."

Political theater is as old as human civilization. A sophisticated play by Shakespeare — that actually presents Caesar (Trump) in a mixed, somewhat favorable light — is something to be discussed, not censored, and certainly not to be [blamed](#) for the actions of a single deranged shooter, as some on the right have [suggested](#).

I recently gave a [speech](#) at Bucknell University in which I criticized America's mostly liberal colleges for silencing views they deem offensive, arguing that it was bad for the students and the country. The same holds for conservatives who try to mount campaigns to defund art that they deem offensive. Do conservatives now want Central Park to be their own special safe space? I, for one, will keep arguing that liberals and conservatives should open themselves to all kinds of opinions and ideas that differ from their own. Instead of trying to silence, excommunicate and punish, let's look at the other side and try to listen, engage and, when we must, disagree.

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