

Opinion

Extremism should not be made welcome in a democratic republic

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

How ironic that we live in a democratic republic, and yet it is some elected Democrats and Republicans who are doing their utmost to cause it to fail?



Grubaugh

It's interesting as spectacle, to be sure, but extremist elements are also downright dangerous when you consider events of the last year. And government's increasing inability to function is now filtering down to the community level. In one of many such recent examples, a woman attending a Virginia school board meeting threatened to leave and return "guns loaded" during a debate over forcing children to wear masks in school. Later, she apologized and said she was speaking only figuratively. In the heat of the moment, supposedly normal types seem to be stepping all over their tongues, then walking back their words. What is wrong with people? If you said Covid-19 and our shaky mental health, that would prob-

ably answer part of the question. And, even with the world's worst virus, we argue over solutions. No, there seems to be more to the divide — almost like some people want to see conflict, want to be obstructionists. Like they have a chip on their shoulder or some hot-button issue that makes them entitled to be confrontational. We all need to look in the mirror. Lest we forget the examples of many other nations, democracies are fragile if not respected. Writer Richard R. Beeman, of the U.S. Constitution Center, once had this to say about our democratic republic. *"There is a story, often told, that upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin was approached by a group of citizens asking what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer was: 'A republic, if you can keep it.' The brevity of that response should not cause us to undervalue its essential meaning: Democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health."* What a wonderful thought: Government recognizing the importance of the people who formed it in the first place. It's been more than a year since Jan.

6, 2021, and we're still trying to figure out why it happened. Without a clear answer, we're open to repeat it. This was a day, like Dec. 7, 1941, that lives in infamy — because of disruption from inside forces, not outside invaders. This year's election may be the most significant of our lives. The Anti-Defamation League says it is tracking dozens of candidates with extremist views who are actively seeking office, either nationally or at state level. That is cause for giant concern. Anger is one thing, but hostility enough to foment violence is another. We don't need white supremacists, anti-American espousers, and conspiracy theorists in government, at any level. Keep an eye out for any candidate who says or does something unethical, evil, or just plain stupid. They should be held accountable. The pandemic has worsened the overall mood, but our deep divide began long before the last administration. Fault both major parties because many members have lost sight of why they were elected and who elected them. So misguided is their fulcrum that both parties make it their stated priority to influence the balance of power. As a result, we see boundaries of elected officials being shuffled to make it harder for incumbents to run for re-

election. We see nationwide attempts to make it more difficult to vote. Participants in both parties are disrupting time-honored processes. And they no longer do it in secret. They clamor for the attention, which is an affront to the intended meaning of government transparency. Sadly, many intelligent, potential voters don't know who to trust and don't bother to show up at the polls. And, people who could be very good officeholders are discouraged from running. This gives rise to the fringe, which is going to be a big issue with elections slated this year. I say, if partisanship is so engrained in your citizenship that you lose sight of everything else, you are failing to live up to your civic responsibility. You shouldn't run for office. If you're not willing to communicate anything other than hate, we don't need you. But if you worry about our future because of the national debt, the threat to our democracy, poverty, war, and the increasingly disgraceful way we treat each other, then I say toss your hat in the ring. We need such leaders.

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Current filibuster rules make the Senate the place bills go to die

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

On Aug. 28, 1957, Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina rose to speak against passage of the Civil Rights Act. In preparation, he had spent days in the steam room dehydrating himself and wore a plastic bag so he would not have to use the bathroom. He spoke for more than 24 hours, asserting that the bill was unconstitutional and unnecessary but, when he finally gave up and sat down, the Senate passed it just two hours later. That's the way the filibuster — the attempt to delay or block action on a bill by holding the floor ad infinitum — used to be. You won't find the filibuster in the Constitution. The practice dates back to 1806 when a Senate rule change prevented the majority from voting to



Ortbals

end debate. That changed in 1917 when the cloture rule was added under which debate could be ended — the filibuster stymied — by a vote of two-thirds of those members who were on the floor. Partly because you actually had to stand and speak like Thurmond did, and partly because no other business could be conducted during a filibuster, they were rarely used. They averaged just one per year from 1917 to 1975. But then the Senate amended the rules making the process far easier. One change was that you no longer had to stand and speak — you could simply declare a filibuster. The second was, multi-tasking was permitted — other business could proceed unhindered. Since then, this is how the process works: A senator can launch a filibuster simply by giving notice to his or her party leader of the intention to do so. When another senator tries to move the legislation, he or she simply stands and says, "I object." They need say no more. The bill is then stalled until such time, if any, that the supporters of the bill can muster 60 votes to invoke cloture. Remarkably easy. It's also cloaked in anonymity. Unlike Thurmond's performance, the public doesn't know who is objecting nor why. They just know that nothing gets done. Bills pass the House and go to the Senate to die a silent death. And because it is so easy to do, so clandestinely done, and nothing else is affected, the filibuster has gone from rare to commonplace. Between 2011 and 2020 there were more than 1,000 cloture motions filed, and President Biden hasn't even been able to get ambassadors to Japan or India approved. Rarely are there more than a handful of senators on the house floor and actual debates seldom occur. Instead, senators trade insults via cable news channels. This is no way to run a democracy. Because of this gridlock, Congress's approval rating has tanked. Nearly three-fourths of Americans thought they were doing a good job in 2001. Now only one in five give them a passing grade. There are those who say we should discard the filibuster — let the majority rule. But I disagree. If the filibuster was removed entirely, the minority would get steamrolled. Public policy would bounce back and forth from one election to the next like a ping pong ball. However, it does need to be changed so that it still serves its purpose but

becomes the rarity that it once was rather than standard operating procedure. I would suggest the following. Return to the talking filibuster. The public should know and see who is objecting to a bill and why. If the opposition feels so strongly about it, they should be willing to stand up and speak for what they believe and let the American people decide who's right and wrong. End multi-tasking. Put pressure on the objectors by not only making them hold the floor but also making it clear that they are preventing the Senate from acting on other important matters. And reduce the threshold to invoke cloture by requiring 60 percent of those on the floor and voting rather than 60 percent of the members. Let's get senators on the floor, debating the issues and keep them there until a vote is taken. It's often been said that the United States Senate is the greatest deliberative body in the world. Maybe that was true at one time, but it certainly isn't anymore. We need to make it so once again.

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