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The Opinion Pages | TURNING POINTS

Trevor Noah: Let's Not Be Divided. Divided People Are Easier to Rule.

By TREVOR NOAH DEC. 5, 2016

Turning Point: *Donald J. Trump is elected the 45th president of the United States.*

When I took over “The Daily Show” from Jon Stewart in 2015, I was surprised to learn that my job as a late-night comedy host was not merely to entertain but to eviscerate — to attack, crush, demolish and destroy the opponents of liberal, progressive America. Very quickly, people from some quarters — mostly those same liberal progressives — criticized me for not maintaining the minimum acceptable levels of daily evisceration that were established by my predecessor.

The truth is that Jon never liked being labeled the Great Eviscerator. He didn't think it was healthy, and he always tried to think about the details of issues with a healthy dose of skepticism before going on air and putting his ideas out into the world. But through the lens of the internet, that's not what people saw. In the early days of the blogosphere and YouTube and social media, people took Jon's most strident commentary and made it go viral with clickbait headlines, blowing those segments way out of proportion, compared with the more thoughtful segments that made up most of the television show. And, unfortunately, when we look back today, the evisceration (and exasperation) is what most people remember.

The experience of stepping into Jon's shoes brought on enormous culture shock for me. In South Africa, where I come from, we also use comedy to critique and analyze, and while we don't let our politicians off the hook, we don't eviscerate one another. If anything, my stand-up shows back home are a place where we can push away the history of apartheid's color classifications — where black, white, colored and Indian people use laughter to deal with shared trauma and pain. In South Africa, comedy brings us together. In America, it pulls us apart.

I grew up under the harsh racial oppression of apartheid as a person of mixed ethnicity. The lines between black and white were clearly drawn and enforced with guns and tanks, but because I am neither black nor white, I was forced to live between those lines. I was forced to communicate across those lines. I was forced to learn how to approach people, and problems, with nuance. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have survived.

America, I've found, doesn't like nuance. Either black people are criminals, or cops are racist — pick one. It's us versus them. You're with us, or you're against us. This national mentality is fueled by the hysteria of a 24-hour news cycle, by the ideological silos of social media and by the structure of the country's politics. The two-party system seems to actively encourage division where none needs to exist.

This has never been more apparent than during Donald J. Trump's campaign for the presidency. With his flagrant misogyny and racist appeals to fearful voters, Mr. Trump succeeded in dividing an electorate already primed to turn against itself. His embittering candidacy obscured the fact that the vast majority of Americans, both Republican and Democrat, wanted many of the same things: good jobs, decent homes, access to opportunity and, above all, respect.

The past year has been so polarizing and noxious that even I find myself getting caught up in the extreme grandstanding and vitriol. But with extremes come deadlock and the death of progress. Instead of speaking in measured tones about what unites us, we are screaming at each other about what divides us — which is exactly what authoritarian figures like Mr. Trump want: Divided people are easier to rule. That was, after all, the whole point of apartheid.

To the extremists and true believers of any cause, there is an idea that

moderation and compromise are simply a prelude to selling out and giving up, when in fact the opposite is true — moderation brings radical ideas to the center to make them possible. Nelson Mandela never wavered in his demand for “one man, one vote”; indeed, he endured 27 years in prison to make that notion a reality. But when our nation stood on the brink of civil war, Mr. Mandela spoke to white South Africans in a language that soothed their fears and reassured them that they would have a place in our new country. He spoke to militant black nationalists in a way that calmed their tempers but did not diminish their pride. If Mr. Mandela’s efforts had failed, South Africa’s peaceful transition to democracy would never have come to pass.

Sadly, given what we’ve seen in this election, Mr. Trump’s victory has only amplified the voices of extremism. It has made their arguments more simplistic and more emotional at a time when they ought to be growing more subtle and more complex. We should give no quarter to intolerance and injustice in this world, but we can be steadfast on the subject of Mr. Trump’s unfitness for office while still reaching out to reason with his supporters. We can be unwavering in our commitment to racial equality while still breaking bread with the same racist people who’ve oppressed us. I know it can be done because I had no choice but to do it, and it is the reason I am where I am today.

When you grow up in the middle, you see that life is more in the middle than it is on the sides. The majority of people are in the middle, the margin of victory is almost always in the middle, and very often the truth is there as well, waiting for us.

Born in South Africa to an interracial couple at a time when such relationships were illegal under apartheid, Trevor Noah weaves observations about race and ethnicity into his comedy. He has hosted various television shows in South Africa, including “Tonight with Trevor Noah,” and is currently host of “The Daily Show,” based in New York City.

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