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## *We Need a Little Fear*

By JONATHAN HAIDT

THE voters have spoken. So, what now? How will our still divided government deal with our mounting threats and challenges?

Shared fear can help.

A Bedouin proverb says, “Me against my brother, my brothers and me against my cousins, then my cousins and me against strangers.” Human beings are pretty good at uniting to fight at whatever level is most important at a given moment. This is why every story about a team of warriors or superheroes features an internal rivalry, but all hatchets are buried just before the climactic final battle in which the team vanquishes the external enemy.

A national election focuses our attention on a single level of competition — political party versus political party. Let’s call that “me and my brother against our cousin.” But after that, it’s time for our national team to come together to fight the many threats and enemies that confront us. Let’s unite with our cousins to fight the stranger!

Except that we didn’t do it four years ago, when things looked even grimmer, and there’s no sign that we’re going to do it now. Since the 1990s we’ve been stuck at one level — party versus party. Partisanship is not a bad thing. We need multiple teams to develop competing visions for voters to choose among. But when so many of our leaders can’t even occasionally place national interest before party interest, we’ve crossed over into hyperpartisanship. And that’s a very bad thing, because it amplifies other problems like the debt crisis, the absence of a rational immigration policy and our aging infrastructure.

We the people bear some of the blame for what’s happened in Congress, for we, too, have become more angrily partisan. So what can we do to pull ourselves up to that higher level? How can we unite not just with our brothers and sisters, but with our cousins?

One way is to focus on common threats, rather than on common ground, just as the Bedouin proverb suggests. It’s only the threat of the stranger that brings the extended family together. A physical attack by outsiders — like Pearl Harbor or 9/11 — binds people together like nothing else. But what if there is no such attack? Can trade competition with China do it? What about a threat we created ourselves?

Well, that depends. A basic principle of moral psychology is that “morality binds and blinds.” In many pre-agricultural societies, groups achieved trust and unity by circling around sacred objects. In modern societies, much larger groups bind themselves together by treating certain books, flags, leaders or ideals as sacred and by symbolically circling around them. But if your team circles too fast, you lose the ability to see clearly or think for yourself. You go blind to evidence that contradicts your group’s moral consensus, and you become enraged at teammates who suggest that the other side is not entirely bad (as New Jersey’s governor, Chris Christie, is now finding out).

Unlike a foreign attack, a problem that threatens only one side’s sacred values can therefore divide us, rather than unite us. It’s as though a giant asteroid is headed for the Earth. One side sees it coming and screams, but the louder it screams, the more stubbornly the other side covers its ears and averts its eyes. Here are a few of the asteroids hurtling toward us, which half of us can already see with our naked eyes:

1. Rising temperatures. The left has been raising the alarm about global warming since the 1990s. It's a threat to the environment and to poor people around the world — sacred values for liberals — but the right largely denies the scientific consensus, in part because many of the remedies would require limits on industry and intervention into markets (which would violate sacred values for some conservatives). Hurricane Sandy gave us a small taste of what's likely to happen more frequently.
2. Rising entitlements. The right has railed against entitlement spending since the 1960s, and its frustration boiled over in the Tea Party movement. The welfare state is a threat to traditional conservative values of personal responsibility (people have less incentive to plan for their own future) and fiscal solvency. Despite the logical errors in Mitt Romney's "47 percent" comments, we do face bankruptcy when the baby boomers retire and a shrinking percentage of workers must pay the ever growing expenses of a ballooning class of retirees. Yet the Democrats want to "protect" older Americans, students and almost everyone else from the need to sacrifice.
3. Rising inequality. The left has been protesting rising inequality since Ronald Reagan cut taxes on the rich and benefits for the poor, and a great deal of recent scholarship documents the socially, morally and economically damaging effects of separating the haves ever further from the have-nots. Nearly all the gains in productivity in the last 30 years have gone to the wealthiest, but the right justifies the trend and denies its toxicity.
4. Rising births to unmarried women. In 1960, 5 percent of American children were born to unmarried women. In 2010, that number was more than 40 percent. Conservatives treat the traditional family as the irreplaceable building block of society and are therefore horrified that unmarried motherhood will soon be the national norm. The left has been ambivalent about the value of marriage (at least, before the push for gay marriage), sometimes viewing it as a patriarchal institution and reluctant to admit that a stable marriage is very good for children.

In other words, America faces many serious threats, but each side sees some and denies others. Morality binds and blinds. The philosopher John Stuart Mill described this problem in 1840, noting that in almost all major ideological controversies, "both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though wrong in what they denied, and that if either could have been made to take the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct."

To see Mill's diagnosis in action, note that marriage is disappearing primarily among Americans without a four-year college degree. Marriage confers so many benefits on children that it helps them rise into the upper tier of wealth; children who don't benefit from a stable marriage are more likely to fall. So if you are a liberal who is worried about the inequality asteroid, you might consider teaming up with a conservative group trying to promote marriage.

But then you'd run smack into the problem that women rarely want to marry a man with no job and poor prospects. So if you are a conservative who cares about the unmarried-mother asteroid, you might want to team up with liberal groups working to improve educational equality and to find ways to keep poor young men in school.

When we focus only on the one asteroid that most frightens us, we feel anger at the partisans on the other side. We curse their blindness without recognizing our own. But if we can look up into the sky and see a whole fleet of asteroids heading for us, we lose our tunnel vision and experience a healthy form of panic. We're in big trouble, and anyone who does that hyperpartisan stuff now should be ashamed — or kicked out of office. The day after Election Day is the day for all of us, and our siblings and cousins, to come together and start building an asteroid deflection system.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/opinion/after-the-election-fear-is-our-only-chance-at-unity.html>