LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

HOW DECENT PEOPLE CAN SAVE AMERICA FROM THE CULTURE OF CONTEMPT
INTRODUCTION

Are You Sick of Fighting Yet?

*I confess without shame, I am tired & sick of war.
Its glory is all moonshine.*
—General William Tecumseh Sherman, 1865

I live and work in Washington, DC, but I’m not a politics junkie. To me, politics is like the weather. It changes a lot, people drone on about it constantly, and “good” is totally subjective. I like winter, you like summer; you’re a liberal, I’m a conservative. Furthermore, political opinions are like noses: No two are totally alike, but everyone has one. My nose is big, but its existence is utterly unremarkable—sort of like my political opinions.

My thing is *ideas*, especially *policy ideas*. While politics is like the weather, ideas are like the climate. Climate has a big impact on the weather, but it’s not the same thing. Similarly, ideas affect politics, but they aren’t the same.
When done right, policy analysis, like climate science, favors nerds with PhDs. And that’s me. I have a PhD in policy analysis; for my doctorate I studied applied microeconomics and mathematical modeling. I taught policy at a university for ten years, before becoming the president of a public policy think tank in Washington, DC, a job I’ve held for a decade. (Before graduate school, I spent twelve years making my living as a musician, but not the cool kind. I played the French horn in a symphony orchestra. So yeah—nerd-o-rama.)

Having a little distance from politics has made it so that even in the heart of DC, I don’t usually take political battles too seriously. In the 2012 presidential election season, my wife and I had a bumper sticker custom-made for the Volvo—VEGANS FOR ROMNEY—just to see the reaction of other DC drivers.

However, even a climate scientist has to think about the weather when a hurricane comes ashore, and that’s what’s happening today. Political differences are ripping our country apart, rendering my big, fancy policy ideas largely superfluous. Political scientists find that our nation is more polarized than it has been at any time since the Civil War. This is especially true among partisan elites—leaders who, instead of bringing us together, depict our differences in unbridgeable, apocalyptic terms.

As much as we’d like to, we can’t joke the problem away. The only truly funny thing I’ve seen in our miserable political culture was a bumper sticker in the run-up to November 2016 that read GIANT METEOR 2016,
suggesting that a humanity-ending catastrophe would be better than the election’s political choices. As my daughter would say, “That’s dark, man.”

I remember when I first recognized the force of this hurricane, two and half years before the 2016 election. I was speaking to a large group of conservative activists in New Hampshire. Public speeches are a big part of what I do for a living, and I address audiences all across the political spectrum. It is the thing I most enjoy about my work. I love meeting people and sharing ideas. It never gets old. This particular audience was an ideological home-field crowd for me, too, because the event was focused on the moral virtues of free enterprise. While I’m not a member of either political party, free enterprise is something I deeply believe in.

I was the only nonpolitician on the schedule, and arriving a little early, I listened to a few of the other speakers before I went on. One after another told the audience that they were right and the opposing political side was wrong. By the time I went onstage, the crowd was pretty fired up. My speech was about how people naturally perceive conservatives and liberals in America today. I made the point that liberals are widely considered to be compassionate and empathetic and that conservatives should work to earn this reputation as well.

After the speech, a woman in the audience came up to me, and she was clearly none too happy with my comments. I thought she was going to criticize my assertion that conservatives are not thought to be
as compassionate as liberals. Instead, she told me that I was being too nice to liberals. “They are not compassionate and empathetic,” she said. “They are stupid and evil.” She argued that as a public figure, I was obliged to say so plainly because “It’s the truth.”

At that moment, my thoughts went to . . . Seattle. That’s where I grew up. While my own politics tend more center-right, Seattle is arguably the most politically liberal place in the United States. My father was a college professor; my mother was an artist. Professors and artists in Seattle . . . what do you think their politics were?

So when that woman in New Hampshire said that liberals are stupid and evil, she wasn’t talking about me, but she was talking about my family. Without meaning to, she was effectively presenting me with a choice: my loved ones or my ideology. Either I admit that those with whom I disagree politically—including people I love—are stupid and evil, or I renounce my ideas and my credibility as a public figure. Love or ideology: choose.

Have you been subjected to a similar choice? Have you been told by a newspaper pundit, politician, college professor, or television host that your friends, family, and neighbors on the other side are knaves and fools, and if you have any integrity, you must stand up to them or leave them behind? That people with a different perspective hate our country and must be completely destroyed? That if you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention? That kindness to your ideological foes is tantamount to weakness?
Whether your politics are on the left, right, or center, most likely you have, and it might just be affecting your life. For example, a January 2017 Reuters/Ipsos poll found that one in six Americans had stopped talking to a family member or close friend because of the 2016 election. A far bigger share of the population has sorted social life along ideological lines over the past few years, by avoiding the places where people disagree with them, curating their news and social media to weed out opposing viewpoints, and seeking out the spaces—from college campuses to workplaces—where they find the most ideological compatriots.

We are being driven apart, which is the last thing we need in what is a fragile moment for our country. America isn’t in the midst of an economic collapse as we were in 2008, but we’ve faced major challenges in the past decade—economically, socially, and geopolitically. Ten years after the Great Recession, millions feel traumatized by political shifts, cultural change, and the uncertainties of a modern, globalized world.

This is reflected in the deep pessimism felt throughout the country even in the face of economic improvement. In a dramatically strengthening economy, more than four in ten Americans say they think the nation’s best years are behind us. Unemployment is the lowest it’s been in decades, and yet three-quarters of Americans still say that either “The middle class does not feel needed or useful in what they are doing and the work that they do,” or “The middle class feels value in what they are doing . . . but are not valued by the nation’s elites and institutions.”
We need national healing every bit as much as economic growth. But what are we getting instead from many of our leaders in media, politics, entertainment, and academia? Across the political spectrum, people in positions of power and influence are setting us against each other. They tell us our neighbors who disagree with us politically are ruining our country. That ideological differences aren’t a matter of differing opinions but reflect moral turpitude. That our side must utterly vanquish the other, even if it leaves our neighbors without a voice.

In the very moment in which America most needs to come together as a nation—at the start of what, for the good of the world, should be a new American century—we are being torn apart, thoughtlessly and needlessly. We are living in a culture of contempt.

We need to fight back. But how?

“We were ready to fight.”

On September 16, 2017, Hawk Newsome and a group of protesters from Black Lives Matter of Greater New York arrived on the National Mall in Washington, DC, to confront a group of Trump supporters gathered for what they called the “Mother of All Rallies.” A community activist from the South Bronx, Hawk had recently been on the front lines in Charlottesville, Virginia, protesting a rally by white nationalists that had made headlines all over the country. He was still nursing a wound from that confrontation, where he had been hit in the face with a rock.
When Hawk and his team arrived on the Mall, he braced for another confrontation, and maybe more injuries. He figured the pro-Trump marchers were not much different from the white supremacists he had faced in Charlottesville. Hawk was filled with disdain for them. The protesters appeared to reciprocate his feelings, yelling, “USA! USA! You don’t like it, get out!” and “Ignore them! They don’t exist!” The two sides traded insults, and the situation became more combustible by the second. Onlookers immediately pulled out their iPhones and became ersatz videographers, ready to capture the clash and post on social media. It was clear that yet another one of those ugly confrontations we have all come to dread was about to unfold.

But then, just as the insults seemed ready to give way to blows, something wholly unexpected happened. Tommy Hodges, the organizer of the pro-Trump rally, invited Hawk Newsome onto his stage. “We’re going to give you two minutes of our platform to put your message out,” Tommy told Hawk. “Whether they disagree or agree with your message is irrelevant. It’s the fact that you have the right to have the message.”

Hawk was ready to fight, not give a speech, but accepted nonetheless. As he took the microphone in his hand, he thought back to a moment in Charlottesville when he was about to pick up a rock and throw it. “This little old white lady, I don’t know where she came from, but she said,
‘Your mouth is your most powerful weapon. You don’t need anything but that.’” Now Hawk had a chance to use it. A committed Christian, he said a prayer, and as he did, he heard a voice in his heart telling him, “Let them know who you are.” He took a deep breath and addressed the hostile crowd with passion and total sincerity.

“My name is Hawk Newsome. I am the president of Black Lives Matter New York. I am an American.”

He had the crowd’s attention, and he continued. “And the beauty of America is that when you see something broken in your country, you can mobilize to fix it,” he said.

To his utter surprise, the crowd burst into applause. Emboldened, he said, “So you ask why there’s a Black Lives Matter. Because you can watch a black man die and be choked to death on television, and nothing happened. We need to address that.”

“That was a criminal,” someone yelled, as boos started emanating from the crowd.

Hawk pressed on. “We’re not anti-cop.”

“Yes you are!” someone yelled.

“We’re anti–bad cop,” Hawk countered. “We say if a cop is bad he needs to get fired like a bad plumber, like a bad lawyer, like a bad . . . politician.”

At this, the crowd began cheering again. These days, there’s nothing political ralliers hate more than bad politicians.
“I said that I am an American. Secondly, I am a Christian,” Hawk said, once again connecting with his audience. “We don’t want handouts. We don’t want anything that’s yours. We want our God-given right to freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Then someone shouted, “All lives matter!”

“You’re right, my brother, you’re right. You are so right,” Hawk said. “All lives matter, right? But when a black life is lost, we get no justice. That is why we say black lives matter.”

His two minutes up, he concluded his remarks by saying, “Listen, I want to leave you with this, and I’m gone. If we really want to make America great, we do it together!”

The crowd roared. They started chanting, “USA! USA!” A lady standing in the front row reached up and handed Hawk an American flag. He held it up and waved it. More cheers. As he stepped off the stage, to his shock and amazement, many of the Trump supporters came up and embraced him. Earlier, when he first arrived at the Mall, he had cut his hand with a knife while opening a box of signs. He had wrapped it in a bandana, but now it was bleeding through. The leader of a four-thousand-man militia saw that Hawk was hurt and took him aside to treat his wound. “He’s treating my finger,” Hawk said. “And the militia guy goes, ‘You know, I thought I understood before, but I get it now. You’re all right, brother.’ We slapped hands.” They have kept in touch since the rally.
“We’re still friends on Facebook,” Hawk says.

Then a man named Kenny Johnson, one of the leaders of a group called Bikers for Trump, approached Hawk. “He’s like a Sons of Anarchy type,” Hawk recalls. “He said, ‘Your speech was amazing. I’d be honored if you met my son.’ So we walked over to see his son, who was playing with his toys under a tree. A little blonde-haired kid named Jacob.”

Johnson asked Hawk to pick the boy up so they could take a picture together. “That touched me,” Hawk says.

After meeting Hawk, Johnson told Vice News, “I feel what he said came from his heart when he got on the stage. I probably agree with 90 percent of what he said. I listened to him with much love, respect, and honor, and I got that back, so as far as I’m concerned he’s my brother now.”

Brotherhood was evidently breaking out all over the National Mall that day. “It was euphoric,” Hawk said. “It kind of restored my faith in some of those people. Because when I spoke truths, they agreed. I feel like we made progress . . . without either side yielding.” He had arrived expecting conflict. Instead, he says, “I went from being their enemy to someone they want to take pictures with their children.”

Hawk told me the experience changed him. After returning to New York, he says, “I wrestled with myself for a few months.” Finally, he says, he made a decision. “I decided I’d rather go with love. I’m not out to blast people anymore. I’m not out to argue, to fight. I’m there to make people understand, to make people come together. I’m here for progress.”
He got a lot of blowback from some in his own activist community, who did not like his sharing a stage with the pro-Trump demonstrators. Some people called him a “KKK-loving Trump supporter.” One activist declared Hawk had “committed treason.” He is undeterred by the criticism. “This divide that’s keeping us from speaking to one another, from understanding one another, we can overcome it,” he says, but “we don’t get there by screaming at each other all the time. We get there by building bridges. So my language has changed. Because what happened on that stage was great. . . . It’s a new day. . . . There’s a new way to do this.”

Tommy Hodges agrees. After the rally, he gave an interview in which he explained why he had invited Hawk onto the stage. “We have so much political violence that’s happening right now,” he said. “I mean, every day you turn on the news, you turn on social media, all you see is people being attacked for their political views. It’s absurd. . . . Political violence happens in Russia. It happens in Iran. It happens in North Korea. It’s not supposed to happen here.”

“It’s time to bring everybody together and get everybody to celebrate America together. . . . So if you are an American, no matter what your color, creed, demographic, political beliefs are, if you’re an American, and you love this country, [you are welcome to] come out and celebrate with us,” Hodges said. “We need to set a new standard. . . . It’s time that people shake hands and agree to disagree. And if people can’t do that, this country is going to fall apart.”
While national media mostly ignored what happened on the Mall that day, it became an underground viral sensation. Fifty-seven million people watched Hawk’s speech on the Internet. Seemingly everyone who saw it, regardless of politics, sent the video on to friends and family with the same message: This is incredible! You have to see this!

That’s how I first saw the video. When the Trump supporters started applauding, my heart swelled. I was so inspired by it that I wrote about the encounter in the *New York Times* and became friends myself with Hawk Newsome. Go online and watch the video yourself and listen to your own heart as you do. I’ll make you a bet: if you’re like most Americans, no matter what your politics, you won’t be hoping that Hawk gets booed off that stage. You will be rooting for Hawk Newsome—and you will be rooting for the pro-Trump crowd to cheer for him.

You won’t be alone. Just look at the comments section beneath the video:

“Progress! It’s happening and all the hate in the world can’t stop it!”

“We need more of this. We should be able to disagree on things, and still be respectful.”

“This is a truly beautiful video.”

“That brought tears to my eyes.”

“Wow, this is so powerful!! . . . Unity is what is going to make the world a better place for all.”
At the beginning of this chapter, I defined our national problem as a culture of contempt. What exactly is contempt?

Social scientists define contempt as anger mixed with disgust. These two emotions form a toxic combination, like ammonia mixed with bleach. In the words of the nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.” Deriving from the Latin word *contemptus*, meaning “scorn,” contempt represents not merely an outburst following a moment of deep frustration with another, but rather an enduring attitude of complete disdain.

This description of contempt will sound familiar to many because contempt has become the leitmotif of modern political discourse. We saw this at the outset of the rally in Washington, DC. We see it on cable television and social media, and increasingly, we see it in person. But if our responses to the interaction between Tommy and Hawk tell us anything, it is that contempt isn’t what we actually want. More important, our responses tell us that the choice between either political ideology or our friends and family, so often peddled by leaders today, is a false choice. A moment like this reveals that Americans have been manipulated and bullied into thinking that we have to choose between strong beliefs and close relationships. Deep down, we all know that the polarization we are experiencing in our politics today is toxic. We hate the fighting, the insults, the violence and disrespect.
Tommy and Hawk inadvertently showed the hunger of Americans for another way. I have seen for myself that this message of kindness in the face of contempt is one that resonates widely. The same year as the rally in Washington, I gave a speech at Harvard University’s Kennedy School. Harvard posted a sixty-second video of the talk. Here’s a transcript of that video, lightly edited for clarity:

We don’t have an anger problem in American politics. We have a contempt problem. . . . If you listen to how people talk to each other in political life today, you notice it is with pure contempt.

When somebody around you treats you with contempt, you never quite forget it. So if we want to solve the problem of polarization today, we have to solve the contempt problem.

I sometimes collaborate on writing projects with the Dalai Lama. Recently, I was thinking about this contempt problem, and I said, “Your Holiness, what do I do when I feel contempt?” He said, “Practice warm-heartedness.”

I started thinking about it, and it’s true. When I do that, when we do that, when we have leaders who can do that, it’s utterly world-changing. You can show true strength if next time you hear contempt, you answer with warm-heartedness.
Every single one of us is going to have an opportunity on social media or in person to answer somebody’s contempt. So, are you going to do the right thing and make the world a little bit better, show your strength, and try to make your enemies your friends? Or are you going to make the problem worse? That’s a question that each of us gets to answer—probably in the next twenty-four hours.

In the next chapter, I’ll tell you more about that conversation with the Dalai Lama, but here I want to share one other thing about that little video: It got eleven million views on the Internet. Look, I’m not a famous celebrity or the president of the United States. I’m a fifty-four-year-old guy who runs a think tank, and I was giving a lecture at Harvard. Eleven million views is a lot.

From those two videos, I had a decent little market test—a sixty-eight-million-person sample that tells me the culture of contempt isn’t what millions of us want. I realized we could fight back against that culture, if we just knew how.

And thus this book was born.

You might be getting the impression that this is yet another one of those books calling for more civility in our political discourse and tolerance of differing points of view. It isn’t. Those standards are
way too low. Don’t believe it? Tell people, “My spouse and I are civil to each other,” and they’ll tell you to get counseling. Or say, “My coworkers tolerate me,” and they’ll ask how your job search is going.

I want something more radical and subversive than civility and tolerance, something that speaks to my heart’s desire—the first word in the book’s title: love. And not just love for friends and those who agree with me, but rather, love for those who disagree with me as well.

Maybe “love” sounds goofy to you, as if I were some kind of hippie (of which I have been credibly accused) or were suggesting an impossible philosophical ideal. The problem here is not the concept of love per se, but its impoverished definition in our popular discourse. People today generally define love as an emotion—an intense feeling. That’s hardly the solid basis for a program of national renewal. When I talk about love in this book, I am not describing something fuzzy and sentimental, but something clear and bracing. In his *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas Aquinas said, “To love is to will the good of the other.” The modern philosopher Michael Novak refines this further by adding two words: “To love is to will the good of the other as other” (emphasis mine). He continues: “Love is not sentimental, nor restful in illusions, but watchful, alert, and ready to follow evidence. It seeks the real as lungs crave air.”

Exactly right. When I call for a standard of love, I am asking each of us to listen to our hearts, of course. But also to think clearly and look at the facts, so that we can truly lift people up and bring them together.
So love isn’t soft or silly. But love for whom? Love for your friends—that’s easy. Love for strangers? Doable. But to love your enemies? Maybe this seems impossible to you. You might say, “There are some people who are simply beyond the pale. There are millions of awful people in this country who advocate ideas that we cannot tolerate. They deserve our contempt, not our love!” I have heard this sentiment from serious journalists, respected academics, and mainstream politicians. I have thought it myself.

That attitude is both wrong and dangerously radical. Anyone who can’t tell the difference between an ordinary Bernie Sanders supporter and a Stalinist revolutionary, or between Donald Trump’s average voter and a Nazi, is either willfully ignorant or needs to get out of the house more. Today, our public discourse is shockingly hyperbolic in ascribing historically murderous ideologies to the tens of millions of ordinary Americans with whom they strongly disagree. Just because you disagree with something doesn’t mean it’s hate speech or the person saying it is a deviant.

Furthermore, this contempt is based on a mistaken assumption—that there is no room for common ground, so there is no reason not to polarize with insults. Think about Hawk and Tommy. If you are a strong conservative and you saw Hawk with his fist in the air at the beginning of the rally, might he not look to you like the worst kind of radical revolutionary, undeserving of any consideration? If you are a strong
progressive, how would Tommy look to you, alongside his fellow demonstrators in groups like Bikers for Trump? Like someone beyond all reason? And yet, through a bit of serendipitous decency, look what happened.

OK, you’re probably thinking, but what about the odd people out there who really are Stalinists and Nazis? These are people at the absolute fringes who propagate conspiracy theories, hate, and racism—who in normal times would be dismissed as the tinfoil-hat crowd but capture public attention in the current contemptuous environment. Some do it under their own names; others are anonymous. What do we do about them?

Let’s start with social media trolls. I get my share of haters on Twitter, from both the left and right. They are almost always anonymous, and many, no doubt, are not even real people, but instead are bots generating controversial content. I argue throughout this book that you should never be anonymous nor engage with anonymous interlocutors. Engagement with love is a human endeavor and requires us to be, and deal with, real people—not disembodied messages.

And the people who say these things openly? There is a tendency to revert to the old joke that if you wrestle a pig, you get muddy and the pig likes it. But ignoring voices of hate is a mistake. If we do, the ideas go unchallenged by people of goodwill. And if these people have views that are truly worthy of contempt? Remember that their views might be, but that no person is. Repudiate their views, confidently and concisely, with respect.
Finally, there is a practical, albeit self-interested, reason to avoid contempt, even for those with whom you disagree most strongly. It’s horrible for you. You will see in this book that contempt makes you unhappy, unhealthy, and unattractive even to those who agree with you. Hating others is associated with depression. Contempt will wreck your relationships and harm your health. It is a dangerous vice, like smoking or drinking too much.

My point is simple: love and warm-heartedness might not change every heart and mind, but they are always worth trying, and they will always make you better off. They should be your (and my) default position.

Easier said than done, of course. It isn’t the “factory setting” for many people, especially when nearly the whole culture is pushing in the opposite direction. That’s why I have written this book—to show you how. In it, you will find cutting-edge research from neuroscience, social science, and philosophy. You will meet the most visionary leaders in politics, business, media, and academia. I will show that without a molecule of mushy moderation, people can become not just warriors for their point of view, but healers in their communities. You will see why the ascendant model of contemptuous leadership is a losing proposition in the long run, as well as why better, not less, disagreement holds the key to greater harmony.

“OK,” you say, “but I’m not a politician or CEO.” Tommy and Hawk aren’t either. They are pretty ordinary Americans. It’s regular citizens
who matter most in the battle against the culture of contempt. You see, whether or not we want to admit it, political contempt and division are what economists call a demand-driven phenomenon. Powerful leaders purvey it, but ordinary citizens are the ones creating a market for it. Think of it like methamphetamines: People who cook it and sell it are doing a terrible thing, and they should stop. But why they do it is no surprise: there’s a lot of money in it. (Later, by the way, you will see that this comparison is not far-fetched. People are addicted to drugs and contempt in similar neurological ways.)

All this means we can’t wait for our leaders to change; we need to lead the rebellion ourselves. While we can’t single-handedly change the country, we can change ourselves. By declaring our independence from the bitterness washing over our nation, each of us can strike a small blow for greater national harmony.

The story of Hawk and Tommy is a metaphor for America—I hope. The events of that day started with contempt but ended with warm-heartedness. Two groups that could hardly be more different overcame their mutual disdain and, without coming to political agreement, still found common cause in their shared humanity and desire for lives of liberty and happiness.

The purpose of this book is simple: to help an America that currently looks like the beginning of the Mother of All Rallies reach a place where it looks more like the rally’s end. Rather than achieving harmony by
accident, as seemed to happen at the rally that day in Washington, I hope this book will help each of us get there on purpose.

So if you are ready to rebel alongside me against the culture of contempt, if you are hungry for a country where people can disagree without bitterness and hatred, if you want to subvert the power of the contempt-mongers, then I have written this book for you.

And if for some reason you don’t agree that our national discourse is in grave crisis, I have written it for you, too. If you read the book, I think there’s a chance I might change your mind about what’s best for you and for the country. Furthermore, I am convinced that by following the ideas and rules in this book, you will be a happier, healthier, more persuasive person.

This book is not an attempt to change your politics. I have strong views, and you probably do, too. Most likely, we disagree on some things. My point in this book is not that you need to change your political outlook, but that I need you all the more if you disagree with me, because our disagreement—if we do it right—is what makes our country strong.

Overcoming a culture of contempt will require more than a rousing chorus of “Kumbaya” and a basket of platitudes. Building real harmony in the face of difference and disagreement is hard work. Americans will have to be willing, as Hawk and Tommy were, to share a stage—sometimes literally—with those on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, equipped with a new outlook on our culture, a
better approach to leadership, the right tools of communication, and a healthy dose of courage, we can bridge the political divides that have proliferated across the country in recent years.

Will we win every heart? Of course not. Nothing could get 100 percent of the population. But I believe the majority of Americans love the country and have love for each other. We just have to build a movement and culture around these truths.

Let’s get started.
ABOUT

Arthur C. Brooks is president of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he also holds the Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Free Enterprise. He is the author of eleven books, including the bestsellers The Conservative Heart and The Road to Freedom. He is a columnist for the Washington Post and host of the podcast The Arthur Brooks Show. Previously, he spent twelve years as a professional classical musician in the United States and Spain, including several seasons as a member of the City Orchestra of Barcelona. A native of Seattle, Brooks lives with his family in Bethesda, Maryland. In the fall of 2019, he will join the faculty of the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School.
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