

OP-ED – *Los Angeles Times*

Liberals vs. conservatives

We are not the same. I equate Republicans' political views with thoughtlessness, intolerance and narcissism. They're neither kind nor empathetic.

By Diana Wagman
February 19, 2012

I recently played poker with a bunch of Republicans. My husband and I, both bleeding-heart liberals, are part owners of a cabin in the Sierra outside Fresno, a very conservative area. The Camp Sierra Assn. president has an annual poker game, and this year we, the newcomers, were invited.

No one mentioned politics. We talked instead about our kids and Las Vegas and the odd warm weather. There was a lot of laughter and a lot of very good Scotch. I had fun even though I lost \$4.

When the game was over, we walked home with our across-the-road neighbors and invited them in for a final nightcap.

They are the best neighbors in the world. Always ready with a tool, an ingredient or a jump-start for the car. Whatever you need, if they have it, they will give it. They are a lovely family: husband, wife and four smart, funny, polite children. I was sure they were Democrats.

As the husband sat down in our living room with his drink, he announced, "The tea party is not racist." We just looked at him. "The tea party is not racist," he continued, "because I am a member of the tea party."

I laughed. I thought he was joking, but he quickly made it clear he was not. He is white and his wife is African American. And they belong to the tea party. They don't care who becomes our next president as long as it isn't Barack Obama. The conversation devolved from there until he was shouting, I was shouting, his wife was trying to calm him down, my husband was trying to calm me down, and our other friends — Democrats — were trying to keep everybody from breaking the furniture.

We argued about healthcare and welfare, President Obama's nationality and religion, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We did not agree on anything. But honestly, the issues were not important. What matters is how personal it quickly became, how vitriolic, how filled with hate. He said I was sucking the country dry with my support of food stamps and public education. He said I needed to get off my butt and take care of myself. I suggested he sign his kids up to die in Iran, the next place he thinks we should attack. He called me a spoiled idiot and worse. I called him selfish, shortsighted and worse. It was awful, and it went on until after 3 a.m.

The next morning, they knocked on our door and we apologized to each other and laughed sheepishly. All in good fun, the wife said. It was the Scotch talking, my husband replied. But my feelings about them are changed. I cannot respect them as I did before. And as they headed back across the street, I saw the look they gave each other: They don't like us anymore either.

My mother had Republican friends. She was a lifelong Democrat, worked with the Adlai Stevenson for president campaign and was a precinct chairman for Hubert Humphrey. She was ashamed of Richard Nixon and thought Ronald Reagan was misguided. Still, she didn't hate Republicans. She disagreed with their politics and they with hers, but she believed people, no matter how they vote, are basically all the same.

I don't agree. I don't want to be friends with someone who is a member of the tea party or is a Newt Gingrich Republican. We are not the same. I equate their political views with thoughtlessness, intolerance and narcissism. I think they are not kind or empathetic. And my neighbor made it clear that he does not respect my opinions or me.

"You're what's wrong with this country!" he shouted. "No, you are!" was my intelligent retort. In only one area could we agree: We each would prefer the other just didn't exist. If only they would all go live in Gingrich's moon colony. If only we would all move to Canada with the other socialists. My mother would have been horrified, but times have changed.

My neighbors want good jobs, nice houses and security for their four children. They want to be able to retire before they get too old so they can spend more time at their cabin. They love the Sierra Nevada and want it to remain pristine. I want those things too. I want it for their children as well as mine, and for all children everywhere. Of course I do. And that's what I find so frustrating.

My views on all these things — gay marriage, abortion, the war in Iraq, healthcare, education, food stamps, even NPR and PBS funding — seem so logical to me. Of course we need to take care of those less fortunate; of course we want everybody to have the joy and legal benefits of a life partner; of course we want every baby to be wanted and every person to be safe, healthy, informed and looking forward to a better future.

These things are no-brainers to me, and it kills me that my neighbor disagrees. I wonder what would happen if he woke up one morning to find that his son had been killed in Iraq or that his 15-year-old daughter was pregnant or that his favorite sister was gay. What if he suddenly lost his job, his wife got cancer, there was no insurance and not much food? I'm not saying I want life to knock him around. But would he still feel that the government shouldn't be helping anybody out?

Next time I drive to our cabin, I'm going to make sure I take everything I could possibly need. I don't want to ask my neighbors for help. I hope it's their weekend to stay home.

Diana Wagman is the author of the novels "Skin Deep," "Spontaneous" and "Bump."

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Conservatives vs. liberals

Debating a liberal is maddening: They think conservatives are evil, while we think they're silly.

By Charlotte Allen
February 19, 2012

A few years ago Ann Coulter published a book titled "How to Talk to Liberal (If You Must)." With all due respect, Coulter, one of my favorite conservative eye-pokers, was wrong. There is no "how" in talking to a liberal. You can't talk to a liberal, period.

Believe me, I've tried. I've got a liberal mother, four liberal siblings and their assorted liberal offspring, and a horde of liberal friends (I went to college and grad school). Whenever I advance to them even the mildest of challenges to liberal orthodoxies, on topics ranging from the welfare state to illegal immigration to abortion, I'm greeted with name-calling, obscenities, shout-overs and, finally, the grave-like silence of ostracism.

The problem is this: We conservatives think liberals are silly; they think we're evil. Tell a liberal that you hope President Obama will be defeated in the upcoming election, and you'll be branded a racist. Voice your opposition to same-sex marriage, and you're a homophobe. Express outrage at the idea of building a mosque on the spot where one of the planes' fuselages fell in the 9/11 massacre, and you're an Islamophobe. If you support the tea party, or Rick Santorum for president, or defunding Planned Parenthood, or setting up credible border enforcement, you could be all of the above plus more: anti-woman, anti-poor-people, anti-tolerance and a "fascist" to boot.

Liberals go on and on about the "Manichaeism" of conservatives: how quick we supposedly are to divide a morally gray world into black and white. But nothing beats the Manichaeism of liberals: Their causes are holy, and ours deserve a bucketful of scatology on Daily Kos.

Here are some characteristics of liberals that make it impossible to carry on a civilized debate with them:

- The personal is always the political, and vice versa. I nearly lost one of my oldest and dearest friends in 2004 after she forwarded me an email containing an incendiary anti-George W. Bush op-ed by the leftist novelist E.L. Doctorow. Among other charges in the op-ed, which made Bush look about as caring as King George III in the run-up to the Revolutionary War, Doctorow claimed Bush didn't care about the "forty percent" of Americans "who cannot afford health insurance." "Do you really believe this?" I emailed back, pointing out that Doctorow had gotten his numbers jumbled. It was not 40% but 40 million Americans — more like 15% — who lacked health insurance for various reasons back then. It took six years for my friend and me to mend our sundered relationship.
- Liberals constantly violate the rule that politics and religion should be off-limits in social discourse. Toward the end of 2008, I received an invitation to some friends' Christmas party. Actually, it was a "holiday" party, since liberals never say "Christmas." The invitation informed me that we would be celebrating, among other things, the end of "eight years of Republican chicanery." Those friends weren't the only ones. A college pal's Christmas — er, holiday — card mailed around the same time rejoiced, "Our man won!" Our man? Liberals simply assume that if you possess a post-secondary degree and you've heard of Plato, you too would like to try Dick Cheney for war crimes and boycott the Lowes home improvement chain because it pulled its advertising from "American Muslim." Then, when they find out you're not on board, their faces petrify into Easter Island stone heads as they make a mental note to delete you from their iPhone address books.

- A conversation with a liberal is a minefield of political-correctness booby traps. Two years ago as I was defending my doctoral dissertation on a medieval topic, I mentioned that wealthy women of that time often functioned as patrons of the arts, commissioning beautifully decorated religious books. "Women like pretty things," I said. OMG! I looked around at the three learned but liberal female professors on the committee, their smiles suddenly frozen into rictuses, groans issuing from their lips. How was I going to tell my husband, who had already made the reservations for a celebratory dinner, that I'd failed the defense? (Fortunately, I didn't, but it was a scary moment.) It's always like that: chance observations about human nature or obvious sex differences drawing blood from the paper-thin epidermis of wounded liberals. You can't say that guys really do drive better than girls. You can't say that girls are worse at math. You can't even say "girls."

I don't have this problem with my libertarian friends, who are up for debating just about anything, especially libertarians' favorite topic, drug legalization. But when it comes to liberals — well, I love my liberal family, friends and academic colleagues, but I try to stick to safe conversation topics such as literature, music, food and gossip. Until one of them — as so often happens — asks, "Don't you think we ought to boycott (Fox News/ the Susan G. Komen foundation/ the state of Arizona/pick a pariah of your choice)?" And when I disagree, I'm the fascist.

Charlotte Allen is the author of "The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus."