

Dear America

What's in it for me? Set America back on track.

September 11, 2001 will never be forgotten. But September 12 shouldn't be forgotten either. In the wake of tragedy, United States citizens of all races, political backgrounds, and beliefs set their differences aside and came together under one shared identity: Americans. Fast forward 20 years, and this sense of patriotism and camaraderie is long gone. In a culture of intolerance, Americans have turned on one another – going from countrymen to enemies and spelling out a dark future for American democracy. In these blinks, you'll learn

how TV dinners may have contributed to the downfall of American culture; why division should be celebrated, not condemned; and what it means for Americans to reclaim the spirit of September 12, 2001.

Americans have let their country slip away from them.

A storm is brewing in the United States. From sea to shining sea, dark clouds of discord shroud the entire nation – forecasting the impending downfall of American democracy. The United States is not what it once was. The nation is deeply divided. Patriotism is at an all-time low. Socialism is on the rise, with major institutions spewing the same radical rhetoric over and over. Facts have become fiction. Cancel culture runs rampant. The Constitution is under attack, with foundational rights like freedom of speech being threatened on a regular basis. Worst of all? Few people are doing anything to set America back on track. The “land of the free,” it seems, is no longer “home of the brave.” Across political party lines, millions of people are left wondering: How did we get here? And what comes next? The key message here is: Americans have let their country slip away from them. It's easy to point fingers at politicians for leading the country astray, but blame won't bring the old America back. This storm has been brewing for years now – and contrary to popular belief, it wasn't spurred on by any one person or party. Together, Americans have allowed their country to descend into disarray. And now, it's up to them to bring it back. To see how far America has fallen, let's rewind to World War II for a moment. Across states, backgrounds, and party lines, Americans courageously rallied to fight Nazi Germany; many citizens lied about their age to serve in the military, storm the beaches of Normandy, and die for their country. Back then, the American people believed in something far greater than themselves. They took the national motto to heart: E pluribus unum, or “Out of many, one.” America was great, it was theirs, and it was always worth fighting for. Fast forward to today, and the spirit of America is suffering. In fact, a study by the RAND Corporation showed that more than half of US military personnel now serve because of the benefits that await them when they get out. For them, it's not about the mission – it's about themselves. How's that for patriotism? In the bygone America, citizens united around three core values: faith, family, and freedom. Today, these pillars have crumbled to the ground. So, how did faith, family, and freedom devolve into me, myself, and I in such a short time span? Let's explore that question in the next blink.

Things went wrong when community stopped being the core of American life.

Frozen mashed potatoes. Mystery meat. Blocks of veggies. Bagged gravy. Thin plastic film. At first glance, TV dinners may seem pretty unremarkable. But what if someone told you that this innocuous invention was partly to blame for the downfall of American democracy? [Pause] Sounds like a pretty big stretch, huh? Well, let's peel back the plastic and take a look. Before the frozen meal market started booming in the mid-1950s, supper time was a staple in households across America. Family members sat around the dining room table each night, said grace, and talked about their days without distractions. Then along came the likes of Swanson. Suddenly, families could prepare dinner in five minutes flat, go to the couch, turn on the TV, and scarf down food without uttering a word. Rather than focusing on one another, people started paying attention to the voices on their TV screens. The key message here is: Things went wrong when community stopped being the core of American life. As the nuclear family broke down, Americans gradually became more self-serving. Around the same time that TV dinners arrived on the scene, electric garage doors started popping up in homes across America. Their effect on community was equally detrimental. Before, people used to socialize with neighbors in driveways and streets before commuting to work in the morning. Electric garage doors put an end to this communal socialization. Suddenly, you could go to and from work without ever speaking to your neighbors - "We the People" were suddenly just thinking about me, myself, and I. While TV dinners and electric garage doors may seem like harmless inventions, they had a profoundly negative effect on American culture. One by one, the pillars of everyday life came crumbling down, and an entirely new foundation was built instead: one of isolation, selfishness, impatience, and intolerance. Americans began valuing convenience over community. They stopped talking to one another and became trapped in their own thought bubbles. Increasingly reliant on technology, they started expecting instant gratification. Craving constant comfort and convenience. Wanting easy lives, with as little work as possible. In a world of distraction, they became morally unmoored, trading "In God We Trust" for "In God We Barely Believe." Put that all together, and what do you get? A frightening future for America.

Diversity of thought is healthy; homogeneous groupthink is not.

Of course, TV dinners and electronic garage doors were only the beginning of America's cultural descent. Then came the advent of social media, which enabled millions of people to throw common courtesy out the window, post inflammatory opinions they would never dare voice aloud, and lose themselves for hours in harmful echo chambers. Before long, a new way of thinking had emerged: I'm right, you're wrong, shut up. People started viewing diversity of thought as something undesirable - dangerous, even. The unspoken sentiment became, How dare other people think differently than me? Here's the problem with that: America has always been divided - and that's actually a good thing. The key message here is: Diversity of thought is healthy; homogeneous groupthink is not. Flip through the pages of a history book, and you'll see that division

has continually propelled America forward. In the nineteenth century, the Civil War divided America in two – ultimately resulting in the abolition of slavery. In 1920, divergent thinking resulted in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. Needless to say, America wouldn't be America without these two monumental events. In fact, without diversity of thought, the United States wouldn't even exist in the first place. During the Revolutionary War, a group of nonconformists rebelled against English rule and paved the way for American democracy. The freedoms and way of life that so many Americans currently take for granted are the direct result of division – something people seem to have conveniently forgotten. Plain and simple, division is at the root of progress. Homogeneous thinking, on the other hand, hinders progress – and conformity comes at a dangerous cost. Americans shouldn't strive to all think the same way. By law, they're entitled to hold different opinions – something that can't be said for people in other countries. Civil discourse is something to be celebrated, not condemned. To reclaim their nation, people must respectfully agree to disagree. Division is not dysfunctional; it's democratic. And free speech is for everyone – not just those you agree with. Remember: "America the Beautiful" is a place where people think differently, but unite around being citizens of the same great country. That's the American way – and it's the only way forward.

Many Americans misinterpret their basic rights.

In order to reclaim their country, Americans must also abandon the misguided notion that they are guaranteed happiness. Look closely at the Declaration of Independence, and you'll see that the American people are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Founding Fathers were careful with their choice of words. There's a big difference between being guaranteed happiness and being guaranteed the pursuit of it. Pursuit means people have to work to be happy – satisfaction won't be doled out on a silver platter. By that logic, Americans don't inherently deserve anything. They don't deserve financial success. They don't deserve to have a bigger and better house than their neighbor. They don't deserve to enjoy everything that happens in their country – from election outcomes to everyday events. America owes them nothing; it has simply given them the opportunity to pursue happiness. The key message here is: Many Americans misinterpret their basic rights. Importantly, America has also given its citizens the opportunity to fail. Look around, and you'll see that many Americans today fear failure. In classrooms across the country, students are awarded participation trophies aplenty – they're wrongly taught that merely existing is enough to make them a winner. This too is poisoning America by fueling nationwide feelings of entitlement. Failure and disappointment are inevitable. People can't aimlessly stumble through life with open palms, waiting for others to hand them happiness and success. Every American is in charge of their own happiness. It's not their neighbor's or government's responsibility. It's theirs. For 20 years, the US Army had a recruitment motto that said, "Be all you can be." It didn't say, "Be all you want to be." There was a reason for that. Anyone can want a million dollars. They can want to be the next president of the United States. Heck, they can even want to be a unicorn. They can want anything, but are guaranteed nothing – and whining won't change that. These are the lessons that children need to be taught in classrooms. To reclaim America, people must live in reality and accept that every citizen can't be happy at once. It's never going to happen, and it was never meant to. At the end of the day, those are the facts – even if they hurt your feelings.

The spirit of September 12 can save America.

September 11, 2001 will always be remembered as one of the darkest days in American history. But the next day, something remarkable happened. From coast to coast, differences disappeared on September 12. It didn't matter if you were liberal or conservative, rich or poor, gay or straight, Black or white, man or woman, religious or an atheist. In mourning, people found meaning – uniting as Americans despite their differences. They were Americans, first and foremost, and they were standing together: out of many, one. The United States had just experienced an unimaginable tragedy. But America was not broken, because its people united – they put patriotism above trivial differences and resolved to fight for the preservation of their great nation. The key message here is: The spirit of September 12 can save America. To dispel the dark storm cloud that hovers over America, its citizens must now live like it's September 12. July 4, 1776 may have marked the founding of the United States. But September 12, 2001 marks the country's future. Unfortunately, the passage of time has pulled Americans apart once again. But now, they need to put polarization aside, swallow their pride, and come together to protect the place they call home. The nation won't be fixed through petty measures, like making enemies of people who think differently, censoring others' thoughts, or trying to prove the superiority of one political party over the other. It will be fixed by civil discourse, patriotism, and a return to the core values that define America. At the end of the day, Americans will always be different. They will never see eye to eye. But they should forever be united in one thing: their identity as citizens of a country worth fighting for. It shouldn't take another tragedy for Americans to come together. "We the People" have cast a storm cloud over their own country – now, it's time to join forces and bring America back.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: America will always be worth fighting for. To combat the cloud of unease that shrouds the United States, citizens must set aside their differences and come together under the label that matters most: Americans. And here's some more actionable advice: Stop scrolling on social media. Not only does social media often serve as a playground for petty disputes, it can also breed unhappiness. In fact, a study from Brown University showed that the more time people spent on Facebook, the worse they felt. So log off, and live in the real world – it may do wonders for your mental health.