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Politics

What a divided America actually hears when Obama speaks

By Greg Jaffe February 13 at 2:55 PM

As President Obama spoke of the country's deepening sense of alienation and anger last month, a teacher in Michigan listened, her eyes fixed on the stone-faced Republicans in the House chamber who in her view represented the problem.

"Let's get over the party lines and work together!" she tweeted during the president's State of the Union address.

In Maryland, a retired lawyer was listening to the exact same words. He, too, was worried about the anger and division gripping the country, but as Obama spoke, his resentment toward the president only swelled.

"Hearing him complain about political rancor is frankly nauseating," he wrote.

The two tweets flashed across the Internet within seconds of each other, each in their own way capturing the country's mood and the challenge facing the president in his final months in office — not simply a partisan divide, but a deep mistrust that has become so entrenched that it seems to affect the very way Americans hear the president's words and see each other.

Obama rose to national prominence on the promise that he could deliver a less fractious and more rational politics to the nation's capital. "Even as we speak, there are those preparing to divide us," he had warned in his 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention. "Well, I say to them tonight there's not a liberal America and a conservative America. There's the United States of America."

And yet 12 years later, Obama is confronting a far more vexing political problem than the one he first described as a product of cynical Washington "spin masters" and "negative-ad peddlers" who would "slice and dice our country" along party lines.

According to experts who study polarization, Americans don't necessarily disagree more on policy. What has changed is the level of mistrust, and even vitriol, Americans have for politicians and their fellow citizens on the other side of the political divide. It is a suspicion that makes people question their neighbors' motives, their sincerity and

their intelligence.

“What’s changed is people’s perception of other ordinary citizens,” said Doug Ahler, who studied polarization at the University of California at Berkeley. “We’ve become so entrenched in our partisan identities. . . . It’s like a really intense sports rivalry. It’s not about policy but an emotional distrust of the other side.”

A senior White House official put it event more bluntly: “We’re literally growing apart from each other.”

A major focus for Obama during his final year in office is to blunt those divisions by trying to remind Americans of the values that they share. “It will be core to what you hear from us this year,” said David Simas, the White House director of political strategy. “You can expect to hear it in every setting, in every place, around any topic and speech, because it is that important to the president.”

Obama’s opening shot on the subject was the State of the Union address — a speech he labored over, writing and rewriting its final section on the country’s corrosive and divided politics, according to aides.

“I’m addressing the American people now . . . ” Obama said as he began his pitch that night.

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In Boyne City, Mich., Erin Mastin, 36, the second-grade teacher, was listening.

“Our public life withers when only the most extreme voices get all the attention,” Obama warned. “Democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn’t matter.”

This was how Mastin felt, and she was sure Obama felt it, too. When George W. Bush was president, she had picked

apart his speeches, like a teacher scouring a paper for plagiarism or a parent's assistance, to figure out which parts he truly believed and which parts had been written for him.

"He would have never used that word on his own," she often recalled thinking as the former president spoke.

She never felt that way about Obama. "Just the way he speaks is genuine," she said. "I know he has speechwriters, but those are his words and his feelings."

For her, Obama's final State of the Union and his call for a "better politics" was an attempt to sort through the country's unfinished business, to face up to his failures in office and prepare Americans for the dangers that lie ahead.

"It was almost like a will," she said. "This is what you need to do when I'm gone. This is what's going to happen, and you need to stay strong."

Obama pressed forward in his address, speaking of a political system that often seemed "rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some special interest."

"Too many Americans feel that way right now," he said.

"I think everybody feels that way," Mastin agreed.

She could feel the influence of money in politics in her classroom, she said. In recent months, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a conservative Michigan-based think tank funded in part by billionaires Charles and David Koch, had begun posting teachers' salaries online. Their goal was to highlight the need for teacher pay based on performance rather than seniority or degrees.

Mastin saw a darker purpose.

“I believe their agenda is to destroy public education,” she said.

She shared the president’s sense of frustration most acutely on the issue of gun control. After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, her school instituted active-shooter drills. “You have to shove all 24 kids into a little tiny area, and we all have to sit there and be quiet until the police come around,” she said.

For the first few years, it was scary for her students. “Is this for real or just practice?” she said they would ask. Then it became a routine part of the school year. “To have it be a normal thing is just really sad,” she said.

She thought of the times that Obama had teared up when talking about the Sandy Hook shooting and said that she knew exactly how he felt, because she had felt the same emotions.

“Why can’t we do something?” she imagined him asking in the Oval Office.

On her television screen, Obama was confessing his regrets over the growing rancor and suspicion in the country that had grown on his watch. “I have no doubt a president with the gifts of Lincoln or Roosevelt might have better bridged the divide,” he said.

It was the only line in his speech that didn’t ring true to her. “I felt like he was set up to fail from the beginning with that,” Mastin said. “The Republicans weren’t going to let him have that victory at all.”

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John Pettit, an 81-year-old retired lawyer, listened to the same speech in his living room in Easton, Md., his anger building as the president spoke of the dangers that lie ahead if the country did not fix its politics and change its course.

“Those with money and power will gain control over the decisions that could send a young soldier to war, or allow another economic disaster, or roll back the equal rights and voting rights that generations of Americans have fought, even died, to secure,” Obama said.

To Pettit, the single sentence encapsulated all that Obama had done to divide the country over the past seven years.

“Hard at work preaching to his parallel universe,” he tweeted.

Pettit had a ready list of Obama’s failings: He had pushed through the Affordable Care Act without a single

Republican vote. He had expanded government assistance to the point that 49 percent of the population — including Social Security recipients — depended on some form of federal help. Instead of working with mainstream Republicans, Obama had demonized, ostracized and ignored them.

“Democracy can work, and you can make people feel heard if you really work at it,” he said. “But he never really worked at it. He never worked with Congress.”

Deep into Obama’s second term, Pettit could feel the country’s mood shifting and turning darker. His dentist insisted to him that Obama was a closeted Muslim — a conviction that Pettit said was absurd.

“It really offends me to hear people talking about a politician’s religion as a problem,” he said, even as he suggested that his dentist’s critique was probably grounded in Obama’s foreign-policy failings.

“I think it’s shorthand for saying Obama is more sympathetic to radical Muslim extremists than he should be,” Pettit said.

Pettit had always considered himself a center-right Republican and not especially ideological. Before retiring, he had run the Washington office of a big, national law firm, where he worked closely with Democrats and Republicans. He was not passionate when it came to gun rights and broke with the Republican Party on most social issues, such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

He sometimes struggled to explain why the president’s two terms in office so infuriated him. “I’m sure Obama is more complicated than I think,” he said before quickly pivoting back to the president’s many flaws. He was “arrogant,” “naive” and “inexperienced.”

On the night of his State of the Union speech, Obama was warning of the dangers of giving in to the creeping cynicism and mistrust that he could sense was spreading through the country.

“There will be voices urging us to fall back into our respective tribes, to scapegoat fellow citizens who don’t look like us, pray like us or vote like we do,” the president said.

Pettit listened and summed up his feelings in a tweet.

“Obama, the most partisan and divisive POTUS in history, still can’t resist preaching and vilifying those who disagree,” he wrote.

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The challenge for Obama — and virtually every politician today — is breaking through in a climate defined more by alienation, frustration and anger than differences on policy. Policies can be modified or changed. But how does a president persuade an angry and mistrustful nation to actually listen to each other?

“It’s an amazing puzzle,” said Simas, the White House political strategy director. “Once we lose the ability to talk to each other, we lose the ability to reach consensus, which is at the core of politics in Washington and every town hall around the nation.”

Obama has promised to make a greater effort in the coming year to engage with Americans who disagree with him, as he did at a recent CNN town hall meeting on guns. As attention shifts to the candidates vying to replace him, senior White House officials said that Obama’s role as a sitting president will allow him to rise above the fray.

That was Obama’s goal in the State of the Union.

In Michigan, Mastin listened as Obama spoke of an immigrant child working late on her science project and a teacher who bought extra supplies to help her.

“That’s my voice,” she recalled thinking.

In Maryland, Pettit listened as Obama described a worker who clocked extra shifts to keep his struggling company open and the boss who paid him higher wages “instead of laying him off.”

“Saintly worker, evil employer,” Pettit recalled thinking. “I don’t know why he does that. Suggesting that the boss appreciated him by not laying him off diminishes the point.”

Obama finished his speech. In the House chamber, Democrats rose to their feet to applaud while Republicans sat silently.

“Well said, Mr. President!” Mastin tweeted.

“Profiles in pathetic delusion,” Pettit countered.

Greg Jaffe covers the White House for The Washington Post, where he has been since March 2009.

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It is also interesting to note that far more justices have died when a member of the opposite party holds the White House.

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