The Perfect American Storm: Incivility, Anti-Intellectualism, Tribalism

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 7, 2017

Americans don’t agree on much these days. But one thing upon which we do agree is that something is deeply broken in our society.

Consider the right track/wrong track poll [2], as aggregated by RealClearPolitics. This is perhaps the simplest gauge of how Americans feel about their country. The numbers aren't just negative; they are overwhelmingly and embarrassingly negative. And it’s been that way for years. Americans, internationally renowned for being an optimistic people, have been uncharacteristically pessimistic for quite some time. Why?

It's difficult to escape the conclusion that our culture has changed, both dramatically and for the worse. I believe three factors are to blame: Incivility, anti-intellectualism, and tribalism. And at the center of that perfect storm is social media.
Incivility. Honorable disagreement appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Depending on the day, I have been called a left-winger, a right-winger, a corporate shill, a "sniveling little demon," and (my personal favorite) "another Jew liar and deceiver [who] writes for Monsatan." These insults are usually directed at me after I write an article supporting GMOs or vaccines. Of course, I'm hardly the only recipient of such vitriol. Just look at how people talk to each other on cable news or on social media.

Anti-Intellectualism. "Alternative facts" may very well be the term-of-the-decade. Expert opinion has been thoroughly rejected as "elitist." Scientific consensus has been mocked. And indisputable facts are undermined with conspiracy theories. It is for these reasons that I believe anti-intellectualism is the single biggest threat to modern society. There is a cure, however. It begins by implementing what I call CRRREST Education.

Tribalism. Tribalism is an "us vs. them" mentality, and it has two primary manifestations: (1) Ideological purity, so that any deviation from orthodoxy is considered heretical; and (2) Hypocrisy,
because people will accept/condemn behavior that they otherwise would not if the behavior had been done by a person from the other team.

Social media feeds off of and amplifies all three factors. As the years have gone by, we have become more uncivil, more anti-intellectual, and more tribal.

To be sure, I'm not an alarmist. I refuse to insist that societal conditions are worse now than ever before in American history. After all, we did fight a bloody Civil War. I do not think we are headed in that direction.

But I do believe we are facing a particularly potent set of circumstances that threaten trust, which is the most basic feature of any society, especially of a democracy. Without trust, it is difficult to imagine how America retains its position as the world's leading economic and scientific power.

And at the center of it all is social media. Ironically, a tool meant to unite us has become the primary means to divide us.