WHY THE PAST 10 YEARS OF AMERICAN LIFE HAVE BEEN UNIQUELY STUPID

It's not just a phase.

By Jonathan Haidt

Illustrations by Nicolás Ortega.

What would it have been like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? In the Book of Genesis, we are told that the descendants of Noah built a great city in the land of Shinar. They built a tower "with its top in the heavens" to "make a name" for themselves. God was offended by the hubris of humanity and said:

Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.

The text does not say that God destroyed the tower, but in many popular renderings of the story he does, so let's hold that dramatic image in our minds: people wandering amid the ruins, unable to communicate, condemned to mutual incomprehension.

The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past.

It's been clear for quite a while now that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel is not a story about tribalism; it's a story about the fragmentation of everything. It's about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It's a metaphor for what is happening not only *between* red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families.

From the December 2001 issue: David Brooks on Red and Blue America

Babel is a metaphor for what some forms of social media have done to nearly all of the groups and institutions most important to the country's future—and to us as a people. How did this happen? And what does it portend for American life?

The Rise of the Modern Tower

There is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales. We see this trend in biological evolution, in the series of "major transitions" through which multicellular organisms first appeared and then developed new symbiotic relationships. We see it in cultural evolution too, as Robert Wright explained in his 1999 book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. Wright showed that history involves a series of transitions, driven by rising population density plus new technologies (writing, roads, the printing press) that created new possibilities for mutually beneficial trade and learning. Zero-sum

conflicts—such as the wars of religion that arose as the printing press spread heretical ideas across Europe—were better thought of as temporary setbacks, and sometimes even integral to progress. (Those wars of religion, he argued, made possible the transition to modern nation-states with better-informed citizens.) President Bill Clinton praised *Nonzero*'s optimistic portrayal of a more cooperative future thanks to continued technological advance.

The early internet of the 1990s, with its chat rooms, message boards, and email, exemplified the *Nonzero* thesis, as did the first wave of social-media platforms, which launched around 2003. Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook made it easy to connect with friends and strangers to talk about common interests, for free, and at a scale never before imaginable. By 2008, Facebook had emerged as the dominant platform, with more than 100 million monthly users, on its way to roughly 3 billion today. In the first decade of the new century, social media was widely believed to be a boon to democracy. What dictator could impose his will on an interconnected citizenry? What regime could build a wall to keep out the internet?

The high point of techno-democratic optimism was arguably 2011, a year that began with the Arab Spring and ended with the global Occupy movement. That is also when Google Translate became available on virtually all smartphones, so you could say that 2011 was the year that humanity rebuilt the Tower of Babel. We were closer than we had ever been to being "one people," and we had effectively overcome the curse of division by language. For techno-democratic optimists, it seemed to be only the beginning of what humanity could do.

In February 2012, as he prepared to take Facebook public, Mark Zuckerberg reflected on those extraordinary times and set forth his plans. "Today, our society has reached another tipping point," he wrote in a letter to investors. Facebook hoped "to rewire the way people spread and consume information." By giving them "the power to share," it would help them to "once again transform many of our core institutions and industries."

In the 10 years since then, Zuckerberg did exactly what he said he would do. He did rewire the way we spread and consume information; he did transform our institutions, and he pushed us past the tipping point. It has not worked out as he expected.

Things Fall Apart

Historically, civilizations have relied on shared blood, gods, and enemies to counteract the tendency to split apart as they grow. But what is it that holds together large and diverse secular democracies such as the United States and India, or, for that matter, modern Britain and France?

Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three. To see how, we must understand how social media changed over time—and especially in the several years following 2009.

In their early incarnations, platforms such as Myspace and Facebook were relatively harmless. They allowed users to create pages on which to post photos, family updates, and links to the mostly static pages of their friends and favorite bands. In this way, early social media can be seen as just another step in the long progression of technological improvements—from the Postal Service through the telephone to email and texting—that helped people achieve the eternal goal of maintaining their social ties.

But gradually, social-media users became more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with strangers and corporations. As I wrote in [a 2019 *Atlantic* article](#) with Tobias Rose-Stockwell, they became more adept at putting on performances and managing their personal brand—activities that might impress others but that do not deepen friendships in the way that a private phone conversation will.

[From the December 2019 issue: The dark psychology of social networks](#)

Once social-media platforms had trained users to spend more time performing and less time connecting, the stage was set for the major transformation, which began in 2009: the intensification of viral dynamics.

Babel is not a story about tribalism. It's a story about the fragmentation of everything.

Before 2009, Facebook had given users a simple timeline—a never-ending stream of content generated by their friends and connections, with the newest posts at the top and the oldest ones at the bottom. This was often overwhelming in its volume, but it was an accurate reflection of what others were posting. That began to change in 2009, when Facebook offered users a way to publicly "like" posts with the click of a button. That same year, Twitter introduced something even more powerful: the "Retweet" button, which allowed users to publicly endorse a post while also sharing it with all of their followers. Facebook soon copied that innovation with its own "Share" button, which became available to smartphone users in 2012. "Like" and "Share" buttons quickly became standard features of most other platforms.

Shortly after its "Like" button began to produce data about what best "engaged" its users, Facebook developed algorithms to bring each user the content most likely to generate a "like" or some other interaction, eventually including the "share" as well. Later research showed that [posts that trigger emotions](#)—especially [anger at out-groups](#)—are the most likely to be shared.

By 2013, social media had become a new game, with dynamics unlike those in 2008. If you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would "go viral" and make you "internet famous" for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.

This new game encouraged [dishonesty](#) and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of how others would react to each new action. One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the "Retweet" button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place. As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, [he thought to himself](#), "We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon."

As a social psychologist who studies emotion, morality, and politics, I saw this happening too. The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage was shocking.

It was just this kind of twitchy and explosive spread of anger that James Madison had tried to protect us from as he was drafting the U.S. Constitution. The Framers of the Constitution were excellent social

psychologists. They knew that democracy had an Achilles' heel because it depended on the collective judgment of the people, and democratic communities are subject to "the turbulency and weakness of unruly passions." The key to designing a sustainable republic, therefore, was to build in mechanisms to slow things down, cool passions, require compromise, and give leaders some insulation from the mania of the moment while still holding them accountable to the people periodically, on Election Day.

From the October 2018 issue: America is living James Madison's nightmare

The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison's nightmare. Many authors quote his comments in "Federalist No. 10" on the innate human proclivity toward "faction," by which he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into teams or parties that are so inflamed with "mutual animosity" that they are "much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good."

But that essay continues on to a less quoted yet equally important insight, about democracy's vulnerability to triviality. Madison notes that people are so prone to factionalism that "where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts."

Social media has both magnified and weaponized the frivolous. Is our democracy any healthier now that we've had Twitter brawls over Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's tax the rich dress at the annual Met Gala, and Melania Trump's dress at a 9/11 memorial event, which had stitching that kind of looked like a skyscraper? How about Senator Ted Cruz's tweet criticizing Big Bird for tweeting about getting his COVID vaccine?

Read: The Ukraine crisis briefly put America's culture war in perspective

It's not just the waste of time and scarce attention that matters; it's the continual chipping-away of trust. An autocracy can deploy propaganda or use fear to motivate the behaviors it desires, but a democracy depends on widely internalized acceptance of the legitimacy of rules, norms, and institutions. Blind and irrevocable trust in any particular individual or organization is never warranted. But when citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side. The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (an international measure of citizens' trust in government, business, media, and nongovernmental organizations) showed stable and competent autocracies (China and the United Arab Emirates) at the top of the list, while contentious democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and South Korea scored near the bottom (albeit above Russia).

Recent academic studies suggest that social media is indeed corrosive to trust in governments, news media, and people and institutions in general. A working paper that offers the most comprehensive review of the research, led by the social scientists Philipp Lorenz-Spreen and Lisa Oswald, concludes that "the large majority of reported associations between digital media use and trust appear to be detrimental for democracy." The literature is complex—some studies show benefits, particularly in less developed democracies—but the review found that, on balance, social media amplifies political polarization; foments populism, especially right-wing populism; and is associated with the spread of misinformation.

When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions. That's particularly true of the institutions entrusted with the education of children. History curricula have often caused political controversy, but Facebook and Twitter make it possible for parents to become outraged every day over a new snippet from their children's history lessons—and math lessons and literature selections, and any new pedagogical shifts anywhere in the country. The motives of teachers and administrators come into question, and overreaching laws or curricular reforms sometimes follow, dumbing down education and reducing trust in it further. One result is that young people educated in the post-Babel era are less likely to arrive at a coherent story of who we are as a people, and less likely to share any such story with those who attended different schools or who were educated in a different decade.

The former CIA analyst Martin Gurri predicted these fracturing effects in his 2014 book, *The Revolt of the Public*. Gurri's analysis focused on the authority-subverting effects of information's exponential growth, beginning with the internet in the 1990s. Writing nearly a decade ago, Gurri could already see the power of social media as a universal solvent, breaking down bonds and weakening institutions everywhere it reached. He noted that distributed networks "can protest and overthrow, but never govern." He described the nihilism of the many protest movements of 2011 that organized mostly online and that, like Occupy Wall Street, demanded the destruction of existing institutions without offering an alternative vision of the future or an organization that could bring it about.

Gurri is no fan of elites or of centralized authority, but he notes a constructive feature of the pre-digital era: a single "mass audience," all consuming the same content, as if they were all looking into the same gigantic mirror at the reflection of their own society. In a comment to *Vox* that recalls the first post-Babel diaspora, he said:

The digital revolution has shattered that mirror, and now the public inhabits those broken pieces of glass. So the public isn't one thing; it's highly fragmented, and it's basically mutually hostile. It's mostly people yelling at each other and living in bubbles of one sort or another.

Mark Zuckerberg may not have wished for any of that. But by rewiring everything in a headlong rush for growth—with a naive conception of human psychology, little understanding of the intricacy of institutions, and no concern for external costs imposed on society—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that had held a large and diverse secular democracy together.

I think we can date the fall of the tower to the years between 2011 (Gurri's focal year of "nihilistic" protests) and 2015, a year marked by the "great awokening" on the left and the ascendancy of Donald Trump on the right. Trump did not destroy the tower; he merely exploited its fall. He was the first politician to master the new dynamics of the post-Babel era, in which outrage is the key to virality, stage performance crushes competence, Twitter can overpower all the newspapers in the country, and stories cannot be shared (or at least trusted) across more than a few adjacent fragments—so truth cannot achieve widespread adherence.

The many analysts, including me, who had argued that Trump could not win the general election were relying on pre-Babel intuitions, which said that scandals such as the *Access Hollywood* tape (in which

Trump boasted about committing sexual assault) are fatal to a presidential campaign. But after Babel, nothing really means anything anymore—at least not in a way that is durable and on which people widely agree.

Politics After Babel

"politics is the art of the possible," the German statesman Otto von Bismarck said in 1867. In a post-Babel democracy, not much may be possible.

Of course, the American culture war and the decline of cross-party cooperation predates social media's arrival. The mid-20th century was a time of unusually low polarization in Congress, which began reverting back to historical levels in the 1970s and '80s. The ideological distance between the two parties began increasing faster in the 1990s. Fox News and the 1994 "Republican Revolution" converted the GOP into a more combative party. For example, House Speaker Newt Gingrich discouraged new Republican members of Congress from moving their families to Washington, D.C., where they were likely to form social ties with Democrats and their families.

So cross-party relationships were already strained before 2009. But the enhanced virality of social media thereafter made it more hazardous to be seen fraternizing with the enemy or even failing to attack the enemy with sufficient vigor. On the right, the term *RINO* (Republican in Name Only) was superseded in 2015 by the more contemptuous term *cuckservative*, popularized on Twitter by Trump supporters. On the left, social media launched callout culture in the years after 2012, with transformative effects on university life and later on politics and culture throughout the English-speaking world.

From the September 2015 issue: The coddling of the American mind

What changed in the 2010s? Let's revisit that Twitter engineer's metaphor of handing a loaded gun to a 4-year-old. A mean tweet doesn't kill anyone; it is an attempt to shame or punish someone publicly while broadcasting one's own virtue, brilliance, or tribal loyalties. It's more a dart than a bullet, causing pain but no fatalities. Even so, from 2009 to 2012, Facebook and Twitter passed out roughly 1 billion dart guns globally. We've been shooting one another ever since.

Social media has given voice to some people who had little previously, and it has made it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their misdeeds, not just in politics but in business, the arts, academia, and elsewhere. Sexual harassers could have been called out in anonymous blog posts before Twitter, but it's hard to imagine that the #MeToo movement would have been nearly so successful without the viral enhancement that the major platforms offered. However, the warped "accountability" of social media has also brought injustice—and political dysfunction—in three ways.

First, the dart guns of social media give more power to trolls and provocateurs while silencing good citizens. Research by the political scientists Alexander Bor and Michael Bang Petersen found that a small subset of people on social-media platforms are highly concerned with gaining status and are willing to use aggression to do so. They admit that in their online discussions they often curse, make fun of their opponents, and get blocked by other users or reported for inappropriate comments. Across eight studies, Bor and Petersen found that being online did not make most people more aggressive or hostile; rather, it allowed a small number of aggressive people to attack a much larger set of victims. Even a small number of jerks were able to dominate discussion forums, Bor and Petersen found, because nonjerks are easily turned off from online discussions of politics. Additional research finds that women

and Black people are harassed disproportionately, so the digital public square is less welcoming to their voices.

Second, the dart guns of social media give more power and voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority. The "Hidden Tribes" study, by the pro-democracy group More in Common, surveyed 8,000 Americans in 2017 and 2018 and identified seven groups that shared beliefs and behaviors. The one furthest to the right, known as the "devoted conservatives," comprised 6 percent of the U.S. population. The group furthest to the left, the "progressive activists," comprised 8 percent of the population. The progressive activists were by far the most prolific group on social media: 70 percent had shared political content over the previous year. The devoted conservatives followed, at 56 percent.

These two extreme groups are similar in surprising ways. They are the whitest and richest of the seven groups, which suggests that America is being torn apart by a battle between two subsets of the elite who are not representative of the broader society. What's more, they are the two groups that show the greatest homogeneity in their moral and political attitudes. This uniformity of opinion, the study's authors speculate, is likely a result of thought-policing on social media: "Those who express sympathy for the views of opposing groups may experience backlash from their own cohort." In other words, political extremists don't just shoot darts at their enemies; they spend a lot of their ammunition targeting dissenters or nuanced thinkers on their own team. In this way, social media makes a political system based on compromise grind to a halt.

From the October 2021 issue: Anne Applebaum on how mob justice is trampling democratic discourse

Finally, by giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. Platforms like Twitter devolve into the Wild West, with no accountability for vigilantes. A successful attack attracts a barrage of likes and follow-on strikes. Enhanced-virality platforms thereby facilitate massive collective punishment for small or imagined offenses, with real-world consequences, including innocent people losing their jobs and being shamed into suicide. When our public square is governed by mob dynamics unrestrained by due process, we don't get justice and inclusion; we get a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth.

Structural Stupidity

Since the tower fell, debates of all kinds have grown more and more confused. The most pervasive obstacle to good thinking is confirmation bias, which refers to the human tendency to search only for evidence that confirms our preferred beliefs. Even before the advent of social media, search engines were supercharging confirmation bias, making it far easier for people to find evidence for absurd beliefs and conspiracy theories, such as that the Earth is flat and that the U.S. government staged the 9/11 attacks. But social media made things much worse.

From the September 2018 issue: The cognitive biases tricking your brain

The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don't share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. John Stuart Mill said, "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that," and he urged us to seek out conflicting views "from persons who actually believe them." People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try

7

to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider, almost as if they are shooting darts into their own brain.

In the 20th century, America built the most capable knowledge-producing institutions in human history. In the past decade, they got stupider en masse.

In his book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Jonathan Rauch describes the historical breakthrough in which Western societies developed an "epistemic operating system"—that is, a set of institutions for generating knowledge from the interactions of biased and cognitively flawed individuals. English law developed the adversarial system so that biased advocates could present both sides of a case to an impartial jury. Newspapers full of lies evolved into professional journalistic enterprises, with norms that required seeking out multiple sides of a story, followed by editorial review, followed by fact-checking. Universities evolved from cloistered medieval institutions into research powerhouses, creating a structure in which scholars put forth evidence-backed claims with the knowledge that other scholars around the world would be motivated to gain prestige by finding contrary evidence.

Part of America's greatness in the 20th century came from having developed the most capable, vibrant, and productive network of knowledge-producing institutions in all of human history, linking together the world's best universities, private companies that turned scientific advances into life-changing consumer products, and government agencies that supported scientific research and led the collaboration that put people on the moon.

But this arrangement, Rauch notes, "is not self-maintaining; it relies on an array of sometimes delicate social settings and understandings, and those need to be understood, affirmed, and protected." So what happens when an institution is not well maintained and internal disagreement ceases, either because its people have become ideologically uniform or because they have become afraid to dissent?

This, I believe, is what happened to many of America's key institutions in the mid-to-late 2010s. They got stupider en masse because social media instilled in their members a chronic fear of getting darted. The shift was most pronounced in universities, scholarly associations, creative industries, and political organizations at every level (national, state, and local), and it was so pervasive that it established new behavioral norms backed by new policies seemingly overnight. The new omnipresence of enhanced-virality social media meant that a single word uttered by a professor, leader, or journalist, even if spoken with positive intent, could lead to a social-media firestorm, triggering an immediate dismissal or a drawn-out investigation by the institution. Participants in our key institutions began self-censoring to an unhealthy degree, holding back critiques of policies and ideas—even those presented in class by their students—that they believed to be ill-supported or wrong.

But when an institution punishes internal dissent, it shoots darts into its own brain.

The stupefying process plays out differently on the right and the left because their activist wings subscribe to different narratives with different sacred values. The "Hidden Tribes" study tells us that the "devoted conservatives" score highest on beliefs related to authoritarianism. They share a narrative in which America is eternally under threat from enemies outside and subversives within; they see life as a battle between patriots and traitors. According to the political scientist Karen Stenner, whose work the "Hidden Tribes" study drew upon, they are psychologically different from the larger group of "traditional

conservatives" (19 percent of the population), who emphasize order, decorum, and slow rather than radical change.

Only within the devoted conservatives' narratives do Donald Trump's speeches make sense, from his campaign's ominous opening diatribe about Mexican "rapists" to his warning on January 6, 2021: "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

The traditional punishment for treason is death, hence the battle cry on January 6: "Hang Mike Pence." Right-wing death threats, many delivered by anonymous accounts, are proving effective in cowing traditional conservatives, for example in driving out local election officials who failed to "stop the steal." The wave of threats delivered to dissenting Republican members of Congress has similarly pushed many of the remaining moderates to quit or go silent, giving us a party ever more divorced from the conservative tradition, constitutional responsibility, and reality. We now have a Republican Party that describes a violent assault on the U.S. Capitol as "legitimate political discourse," supported—or at least not contradicted—by an array of right-wing think tanks and media organizations.

The stupidity on the right is most visible in the many conspiracy theories spreading across right-wing media and now into Congress. "Pizzagate," QAnon, the belief that vaccines contain microchips, the conviction that Donald Trump won reelection—it's hard to imagine any of these ideas or belief systems reaching the levels that they have without Facebook and Twitter.

The Democrats have also been hit hard by structural stupidity, though in a different way. In the Democratic Party, the struggle between the progressive wing and the more moderate factions is open and ongoing, and often the moderates win. The problem is that the left controls the commanding heights of the culture: universities, news organizations, Hollywood, art museums, advertising, much of Silicon Valley, and the teachers' unions and teaching colleges that shape K–12 education. And in many of those institutions, dissent *has* been stifled: When everyone was issued a dart gun in the early 2010s, many left-leaning institutions began shooting themselves in the brain. And unfortunately, those were the brains that inform, instruct, and entertain most of the country.

Liberals in the late 20th century shared a belief that the sociologist Christian Smith called the "liberal progress" narrative, in which America used to be horrifically unjust and repressive, but, thanks to the struggles of activists and heroes, has made (and continues to make) progress toward realizing the noble promise of its founding. This story easily supports liberal patriotism, and it was the animating narrative of Barack Obama's presidency. It is also the view of the "traditional liberals" in the "Hidden Tribes" study (11 percent of the population), who have strong humanitarian values, are older than average, and are largely the people leading America's cultural and intellectual institutions.

But when the newly viralized social-media platforms gave everyone a dart gun, it was younger progressive activists who did the most shooting, and they aimed a disproportionate number of their darts at these older liberal leaders. Confused and fearful, the leaders rarely challenged the activists or their nonliberal narrative in which life at every institution is an eternal battle among identity groups over a zero-sum pie, and the people on top got there by oppressing the people on the bottom. This new narrative is rigidly egalitarian—focused on equality of outcomes, not of rights or opportunities. It is unconcerned with individual rights.

The universal charge against people who disagree with this narrative is not "traitor"; it is "racist," "transphobe," "Karen," or some related scarlet letter marking the perpetrator as one who hates or harms a marginalized group. The punishment that feels right for such crimes is not execution; it is public shaming and social death.

You can see the stupefaction process most clearly when a person on the left merely points to research that questions or contradicts a favored belief among progressive activists. Someone on Twitter will find a way to associate the dissenter with racism, and others will pile on. For example, in the first week of protests after the killing of George Floyd, some of which included violence, the progressive policy analyst David Shor, then employed by Civis Analytics, tweeted a link to a study showing that violent protests back in the 1960s led to electoral setbacks for the Democrats in nearby counties. Shor was clearly trying to be helpful, but in the ensuing outrage he was accused of "anti-Blackness" and was soon dismissed from his job. (Civis Analytics has denied that the tweet led to Shor's firing.)

The Shor case became famous, but anyone on Twitter had already seen dozens of examples teaching the basic lesson: Don't question your own side's beliefs, policies, or actions. And when traditional liberals go silent, as so many did in the summer of 2020, the progressive activists' more radical narrative takes over as the governing narrative of an organization. This is why so many epistemic institutions seemed to "go woke" in rapid succession that year and the next, beginning with a wave of controversies and resignations at *The New York Times* and other newspapers, and continuing on to social-justice pronouncements by groups of doctors and medical associations (one publication by the American Medical Association and the Association of American Medical Colleges, for instance, advised medical professionals to refer to neighborhoods and communities as "oppressed" or "systematically divested" instead of "vulnerable" or "poor"), and the hurried transformation of curricula at New York City's most expensive private schools.

Tragically, we see stupefaction playing out on both sides in the COVID wars. The right has been so committed to minimizing the risks of COVID that it has turned the disease into one that preferentially kills Republicans. The progressive left is so committed to maximizing the dangers of COVID that it often embraces an equally maximalist, one-size-fits-all strategy for vaccines, masks, and social distancing—even as they pertain to children. Such policies are not as deadly as spreading fears and lies about vaccines, but many of them have been devastating for the mental health and education of children, who desperately need to play with one another and go to school; we have little clear evidence that school closures and masks for young children reduce deaths from COVID. Most notably for the story I'm telling here, progressive parents who argued against school closures were frequently savaged on social media and met with the ubiquitous leftist accusations of racism and white supremacy. Others in blue cities learned to keep quiet.

American politics is getting ever more ridiculous and dysfunctional not because Americans are getting less intelligent. The problem is structural. Thanks to enhanced-virality social media, dissent is punished within many of our institutions, which means that bad ideas get elevated into official policy.

It's Going to Get Much Worse

in a 2018 interview, Steve Bannon, the former adviser to Donald Trump, said that the way to deal with the media is "to flood the zone with shit." He was describing the "firehose of falsehood" tactic pioneered by Russian disinformation programs to keep Americans confused, disoriented, and angry. But

back then, in 2018, there was an upper limit to the amount of shit available, because all of it had to be created by a person (other than some low-quality stuff produced by bots).

Now, however, artificial intelligence is close to enabling the limitless spread of highly believable disinformation. The AI program GPT-3 is already so good that you can give it a topic and a tone and it will spit out as many essays as you like, typically with perfect grammar and a surprising level of coherence. In a year or two, when the program is upgraded to GPT-4, it will become far more capable. In a 2020 essay titled "The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite," Renée DiResta, the research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, explained that spreading falsehoods—whether through text, images, or deep-fake videos—will quickly become inconceivably easy. (She co-wrote the essay with GPT-3.)

American factions won't be the only ones using AI and social media to generate attack content; our adversaries will too. In a haunting 2018 essay titled "The Digital Maginot Line," DiResta described the state of affairs bluntly. "We are immersed in an evolving, ongoing conflict: an Information World War in which state actors, terrorists, and ideological extremists leverage the social infrastructure underpinning everyday life to sow discord and erode shared reality," she wrote. The Soviets used to have to send over agents or cultivate Americans willing to do their bidding. But social media made it cheap and easy for Russia's Internet Research Agency to invent fake events or distort real ones to stoke rage on both the left and the right, often over race. Later research showed that an intensive campaign began on Twitter in 2013 but soon spread to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among other platforms. One of the major goals was to polarize the American public and spread distrust—to split us apart at the exact weak point that Madison had identified.

If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse.

We now know that it's not just the Russians attacking American democracy. Before the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, China had mostly focused on domestic platforms such as WeChat. But now China is discovering how much it can do with Twitter and Facebook, for so little money, in its escalating conflict with the U.S. Given China's own advances in AI, we can expect it to become more skillful over the next few years at further dividing America and further uniting China.

In the 20th century, America's shared identity as the country leading the fight to make the world safe for democracy was a strong force that helped keep the culture and the polity together. In the 21st century, America's tech companies have rewired the world and created products that now appear to be corrosive to democracy, obstacles to shared understanding, and destroyers of the modern tower.

Democracy After Babel

we can never return to the way things were in the pre-digital age. The norms, institutions, and forms of political participation that developed during the long era of mass communication are not going to work well now that technology has made everything so much faster and more multidirectional, and when bypassing professional gatekeepers is so easy. And yet American democracy is now operating outside the bounds of sustainability. If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse during the next major war, pandemic, financial meltdown, or constitutional crisis.

What changes are needed? Redesigning democracy for the digital age is far beyond my abilities, but I can suggest three categories of reforms—three goals that must be achieved if democracy is to remain viable in the post-Babel era. We must harden democratic institutions so that they can withstand chronic anger and mistrust, reform social media so that it becomes less socially corrosive, and better prepare the next generation for democratic citizenship in this new age.

Harden Democratic Institutions

Political polarization is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. Thus, whatever else we do, we must reform key institutions so that they can continue to function even if levels of anger, misinformation, and violence increase far above those we have today.

For instance, the legislative branch was designed to require compromise, yet Congress, social media, and partisan cable news channels have co-evolved such that any legislator who reaches across the aisle may face outrage within hours from the extreme wing of her party, damaging her fundraising prospects and raising her risk of being primaried in the next election cycle.

Reforms should reduce the outsize influence of angry extremists and make legislators more responsive to the average voter in their district. One example of such a reform is to end closed party primaries, replacing them with a single, nonpartisan, open primary from which the top several candidates advance to a general election that also uses ranked-choice voting. A version of this voting system has already been implemented in Alaska, and it seems to have given Senator Lisa Murkowski more latitude to oppose former President Trump, whose favored candidate would be a threat to Murkowski in a closed Republican primary but is not in an open one.

A second way to harden democratic institutions is to reduce the power of either political party to game the system in its favor, for example by drawing its preferred electoral districts or selecting the officials who will supervise elections. These jobs should all be done in a nonpartisan way. Research on procedural justice shows that when people perceive that a process is fair, they are more likely to accept the legitimacy of a decision that goes against their interests. Just think of the damage already done to the Supreme Court's legitimacy by the Senate's Republican leadership when it blocked consideration of Merrick Garland for a seat that opened up nine months before the 2016 election, and then rushed through the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett in 2020. A widely discussed reform would end this political gamesmanship by having justices serve staggered 18-year terms so that each president makes one appointment every two years.

Reform Social Media

A democracy cannot survive if its public squares are places where people fear speaking up and where no stable consensus can be reached. Social media's empowerment of the far left, the far right, domestic trolls, and foreign agents is creating a system that looks less like democracy and more like rule by the most aggressive.

But it is within our power to reduce social media's ability to dissolve trust and foment structural stupidity. Reforms should limit the platforms' amplification of the aggressive fringes while giving more voice to what More in Common calls "the exhausted majority."

Those who oppose regulation of social media generally focus on the legitimate concern that government-mandated content restrictions will, in practice, devolve into censorship. But the main problem with social media is not that some people *post* fake or toxic stuff; it's that fake and outrage-inducing content can now *attain a level of reach and influence* that was not possible before 2009. The Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen advocates for simple changes to the architecture of the platforms, rather than for massive and ultimately futile efforts to police all content. For example, she has suggested modifying the "Share" function on Facebook so that after any content has been shared twice, the third person in the chain must take the time to copy and paste the content into a new post. Reforms like this are not censorship; they are viewpoint-neutral and content-neutral, and they work equally well in all languages. They don't stop anyone from saying anything; they just slow the spread of content that is, on average, less likely to be true.

Perhaps the biggest single change that would reduce the toxicity of existing platforms would be user verification as a precondition for gaining the algorithmic amplification that social media offers.

Read: Facebook has a superuser-supremacy problem

Banks and other industries have "know your customer" rules so that they can't do business with anonymous clients laundering money from criminal enterprises. Large social-media platforms should be required to do the same. That does not mean users would have to post under their real names; they could still use a pseudonym. It just means that before a platform spreads your words to millions of people, it has an obligation to verify (perhaps through a third party or nonprofit) that you are a real human being, in a particular country, and are old enough to be using the platform. This one change would wipe out most of the hundreds of millions of bots and fake accounts that currently pollute the major platforms. It would also likely reduce the frequency of death threats, rape threats, racist nastiness, and trolling more generally. Research shows that antisocial behavior becomes more common online when people feel that their identity is unknown and untraceable.

In any case, the growing evidence that social media is damaging democracy is sufficient to warrant greater oversight by a regulatory body, such as the Federal Communications Commission or the Federal Trade Commission. One of the first orders of business should be compelling the platforms to share their data and their algorithms with academic researchers.

Prepare the Next Generation

The members of Gen Z—those born in and after 1997—bear none of the blame for the mess we are in, but they are going to inherit it, and the preliminary signs are that older generations have prevented them from learning how to handle it.

Childhood has become more tightly circumscribed in recent generations—with less opportunity for free, unstructured play; less unsupervised time outside; more time online. Whatever else the effects of these shifts, they have likely impeded the development of abilities needed for effective self-governance for many young adults. Unsupervised free play is nature's way of teaching young mammals the skills they'll need as adults, which for humans include the ability to cooperate, make and enforce rules, compromise, adjudicate conflicts, and accept defeat. A brilliant 2015 essay by the economist Steven Horwitz argued that free play prepares children for the "art of association" that Alexis de Tocqueville said was the key to the vibrancy of American democracy; he also argued that its loss posed "a serious threat to liberal

societies." A generation prevented from learning these social skills, Horwitz warned, would habitually appeal to authorities to resolve disputes and would suffer from a "coarsening of social interaction" that would "create a world of more conflict and violence."

From the September 2017 issue: Have smartphones destroyed a generation?

And while social media has eroded the art of association throughout society, it may be leaving its deepest and most enduring marks on adolescents. A surge in rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among American teens began suddenly in the early 2010s. (The same thing happened to Canadian and British teens, at the same time.) The cause is not known, but the timing points to social media as a substantial contributor—the surge began just as the large majority of American teens became daily users of the major platforms. Correlational and experimental studies back up the connection to depression and anxiety, as do reports from young people themselves, and from Facebook's own research, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal*.

Depression makes people less likely to want to engage with new people, ideas, and experiences. Anxiety makes new things seem more threatening. As these conditions have risen and as the lessons on nuanced social behavior learned through free play have been delayed, tolerance for diverse viewpoints and the ability to work out disputes have diminished among many young people. For example, university communities that could tolerate a range of speakers as recently as 2010 arguably began to lose that ability in subsequent years, as Gen Z began to arrive on campus. Attempts to disinvite visiting speakers rose. Students did not just say that they disagreed with visiting speakers; some said that those lectures would be dangerous, emotionally devastating, a form of violence. Because rates of teen depression and anxiety have continued to rise into the 2020s, we should expect these views to continue in the generations to follow, and indeed to become more severe.

Read: Why I cover campus controversies

The most important change we can make to reduce the damaging effects of social media on children is to delay entry until they have passed through puberty. Congress should update the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which unwisely set the age of so-called internet adulthood (the age at which companies can collect personal information from children without parental consent) at 13 back in 1998, while making little provision for effective enforcement. The age should be raised to at least 16, and companies should be held responsible for enforcing it.

More generally, to prepare the members of the next generation for post-Babel democracy, perhaps the most important thing we can do is let them out to play. Stop starving children of the experiences they most need to become good citizens: free play in mixed-age groups of children with minimal adult supervision. Every state should follow the lead of Utah, Oklahoma, and Texas and pass a version of the Free-Range Parenting Law that helps assure parents that they will not be investigated for neglect if their 8- or 9-year-old children are spotted playing in a park. With such laws in place, schools, educators, and public-health authorities should then encourage parents to let their kids walk to school and play in groups outside, just as more kids used to do.

Hope After Babel

the story i have told is bleak, and there is little evidence to suggest that America will return to some semblance of normalcy and stability in the next five or 10 years. Which side is going to become

conciliatory? What is the likelihood that Congress will enact major reforms that strengthen democratic institutions or detoxify social media?

Yet when we look away from our dysfunctional federal government, disconnect from social media, and talk with our neighbors directly, things seem more hopeful. Most Americans in the More in Common report are members of the "exhausted majority," which is tired of the fighting and is willing to listen to the other side and compromise. Most Americans now see that social media is having a negative impact on the country, and are becoming more aware of its damaging effects on children.

Will we do anything about it?

When Tocqueville toured the United States in the 1830s, he was impressed by the American habit of forming voluntary associations to fix local problems, rather than waiting for kings or nobles to act, as Europeans would do. That habit is still with us today. In recent years, Americans have started hundreds of groups and organizations dedicated to building trust and friendship across the political divide, including BridgeUSA, Braver Angels (on whose board I serve), and many others listed at BridgeAlliance.us. We cannot expect Congress and the tech companies to save us. We must change ourselves and our communities.

What would it be like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? We know. It is a time of confusion and loss. But it is also a time to reflect, listen, and build.

This article appears in the May 2022 print edition with the headline "After Babel."

Read more of Jonathan Haidt's writing in The Atlantic *on social media and society:*

- *The Dark Psychology of Social Networks*

- *How Trigger Warnings Are Hurting Mental Health on Campus*

- *Facebook's Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls*

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business. He is the author of *The Righteous Mind* and the co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, which originated as a September 2015 *Atlantic* sto

The Tower of Babel.

Wee Ones' Bible Stories — Anonymous

The sons of Noah were named Shem, Ham and Japheth. These sons in turn became the fathers of children so that the descendants of Noah were very numerous.

One of these descendants, named Nimrod, was a mighty hunter and a man of power and authority in the land, and it has even been said that the people worshiped him as a god.

In those days men liked to build high towers reaching away up toward the heavens. Perhaps they were afraid of another flood, and perhaps they simply wished to show what they could do; but however that may be, ruins of towers can still be seen in various parts of the world, one of the most noted of which is that of the "Tower of Nimrod." It is forty feet high and stands on the top of a hill near the River Euphrates in Asia.

In the time of Nimrod, the people said, "Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto Heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." So they began to build the tower, and they made it very strong indeed, and kept raising it higher and higher toward the heavens, thinking, Jewish tradition, or story, tells us, that they would have a shelter in which they would be perfectly safe from any flood which might come, or any fire. There were some of the people also who wished to use the tower as a temple for the idols which they worshiped. Six hundred thousand men worked upon this wonderful tower, so the story goes on to say, and they kept up the work until the tower rose to a height of seventy miles, so that, toward the last, it took a year to get materials for the work up to the top where the laborers were employed. Of course this story is exaggerated, but without doubt the tower rose to a great height and was a wonderful piece of work.

God was not pleased with what the people were doing, however, because they thought themselves so great and powerful that they had no need of Him, and so He put an end to their bold plans.

Up to this time all the people of the world had spoken the same language; but now, when they were working upon this wonderful tower, they commenced to talk in different tongues so that they could not understand each other, and there was great confusion. Owing to this, they were obliged to give up the building of the tower, and they separated themselves into groups, or divisions, each division speaking the same language, and then they spread out over the world, forming the various nations.

The tower was called the Tower of Babel because of the babel, or confusion, of tongues which had taken place there, and it was left unfinished to be a monument of God's power and man's weakness without Him.

[Illustration: THE TOWER OF BABEL.]

These men were skillful in building, else they never could have gone as far as they did in their stupendous work, and God was willing that they should exercise their skill, as He is willing that people shall do now; but when they thought themselves equal to Him, they learned how weak they really were in comparison. The story teaches the great lesson of dependence upon God and submission to His will and His laws.

The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection
From the New York Packet. Friday, November 23, 1787.
MADISON

To the People of the State of New York:

AMONG the numerous advantages promised by a wellconstructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice. He will not fail, therefore, to set a due value on any plan which, without violating the principles to which he is attached, provides a proper cure for it. The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished; as they continue to be the favorite and fruitful topics from which the adversaries to liberty derive their most specious declamations. The valuable improvements made by the American constitutions on the popular models, both ancient and modern, cannot certainly be too much admired; but it would be an unwarrantable partiality, to contend that they have as effectually obviated the danger on this side, as was wished and expected. Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority. However anxiously we may wish that these complaints had no foundation, the evidence, of known facts will not permit us to deny that they are in some degree true. It will be found, indeed, on a candid review of our situation, that some of the distresses under which we labor have been erroneously charged on the operation of our governments; but it will be found, at the same time, that other causes will not alone account for many of our heaviest misfortunes; and, particularly, for that prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other. These must be chiefly, if not wholly, effects of the unsteadiness and injustice with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administrations.

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects.

There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy, that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

The second expedient is as impracticable as the first would be unwise. As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves. The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government. From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties.

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.

No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men are unfit to be both judges and parties at the same time; yet what are many of the most important acts of legislation, but so many judicial determinations, not indeed concerning the rights of single persons, but concerning the rights of large bodies of citizens? And what are the different classes of legislators but advocates and parties to the causes which they determine? Is a law proposed concerning private debts? It is a question to which the creditors are parties on one side and the debtors on the other. Justice ought to hold the balance between them. Yet the parties are, and must be, themselves the judges; and the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail. Shall domestic manufactures be encouraged, and in what degree, by restrictions on foreign manufactures? are questions which would be differently decided by the landed and the manufacturing classes, and probably by neither with a sole regard to justice and the public good. The apportionment of

taxes on the various descriptions of property is an act which seems to require the most exact impartiality; yet there is, perhaps, no legislative act in which greater opportunity and temptation are given to a predominant party to trample on the rules of justice. Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets.

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Nor, in many cases, can such an adjustment be made at all without taking into view indirect and remote considerations, which will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party may find in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.

The inference to which we are brought is, that the **CAUSES** of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its **EFFECTS**.

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. It may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution. When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. Let me add that it is the great desideratum by which this form of government can be rescued from the opprobrium under which it has so long labored, and be recommended to the esteem and adoption of mankind.

By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control. They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.

From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which

it varies from pure democracy, and we shall comprehend both the nature of the cure and the efficacy which it must derive from the Union.

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose. On the other hand, the effect may be inverted. Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people. The question resulting is, whether small or extensive republics are more favorable to the election of proper guardians of the public weal; and it is clearly decided in favor of the latter by two obvious considerations:

In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.

In the next place, as each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.

It must be confessed that in this, as in most other cases, there is a mean, on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects. The federal Constitution forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures.

The other point of difference is, the greater number of citizens and extent of territory which may be brought within the compass of republican than of democratic government; and it is this circumstance principally which renders factious combinations less to be dreaded in the former than in the latter. The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which

they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.

Hence, it clearly appears, that the same advantage which a republic has over a democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small republic,--is enjoyed by the Union over the States composing it. Does the advantage consist in the substitution of representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and schemes of injustice? It will not be denied that the representation of the Union will be most likely to possess these requisite endowments. Does it consist in the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties, against the event of any one party being able to outnumber and oppress the rest? In an equal degree does the increased variety of parties comprised within the Union, increase this security. Does it, in fine, consist in the greater obstacles opposed to the concert and accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority? Here, again, the extent of the Union gives it the most palpable advantage.

The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State.

In the extent and proper structure of the Union, therefore, we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government. And according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans, ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of Federalists.

PUBLIUS