

**ARIZONA**

# Political divides are clear on this Arizona street, but is there also a path to the center?

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Unity.

If there was a theme in President Joe Biden's inaugural address on Wednesday, it was unity.

He said as much when a reporter tossed him an impromptu question during his walk down Pennsylvania Avenue shortly after he was sworn in.

And he said it during his inaugural address. He used the word or a variation of it — uniting or united — 13 times in his 21-minute speech. He used the phrase “one another” seven times, the word “together” six times, and the phrase “one nation” twice.

But while the aspiration of unity and coming together make for soaring oratory, the reality presents a sobering challenge.

A century ago, the poet William Butler Yeats wrote that “the centre cannot hold.”

The line is part of a dark, apocalyptic poem called “The Second Coming,” a staple of 20th century literature classes.

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre,” the poem's first stanza begins. “The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Yeats wrote those lines during a time of cataclysmic upheaval.

A time when his native Ireland was riven with civic strife that bordered on civil war. A time when a global pandemic had killed millions. A time when a generation of young men had been slaughtered. A time when the twin tides of Bolshevism and facism were beginning to wash over Europe and technology was disrupting the way the world communicated.

A time not unlike today.

In the century since Yeats' words were published, politicians, pundits and authors have interpreted and debated world events through his words and images.

On the day of Biden's inauguration, former Vice President Al Gore invoked them as he pointed out that the nation had ultimately achieved another peaceful transfer of power, despite the 10 weeks of tumult that followed the contentious November election.

"The center held," he said in an NBC News interview.

Not everyone thought it would.

Today, we are a country riven with civic strife bordering on civil war, fueled in part by disruptive communications technologies; a country that has lost more than 400,000 souls to a pandemic; a country that has spent nearly two decades in a never-ending war abroad and faces a rising tide of fascism; and a country that has exercised its most harrowing transfer of power in modern memory.

The question remains, can the center hold?



Jim Hudson is 60 years old. He has lived in the same house on Jarvis Street in central Mesa for nearly 30 years. It is a neighborhood that is politely referred to as "transitional," a tract of homes built during the post-World War II boom years that now show their age.

The area was particularly hit hard by foreclosures during the Great Recession of 2008, and the promise of revitalization from a nearby light rail extension has yet to materialize.

In a city that is overwhelmingly white, the neighborhood is 56 percent Latino. In a city with pockets of great wealth, the median income is a third lower than Mesa as a whole. And in a city that prizes education, 26 percent of the adults over age 25 did not graduate from high school.

It is a neighborhood in a polling precinct that narrowly voted for Donald Trump in 2016 —

he won by 2% — but four years later went overwhelmingly for Biden, who won by 11 points in November.

From his carport, Hudson can see two houses across the street that reflect opposite poles of the political spectrum in a divided America.

One of them flies two American flags, a pro-police thin-blue-line flag and a Trump 2020 banner, even though it is more than two months since the election.

In front of the other still sits a lone Biden/Harris sign that makes every bit as much of a statement.

Hudson, who is a licensed private investigator, likes both families, and he likes to keep his political opinions to himself.

He'd like the country to get back to the center, but he's just not sure how to do it.

"I wish I had a magic answer, but I just don't," he says.

"So many people have their one, two, three points that they are totally for or totally against, and they're not compromising," he said. "It starts with the politicians and flows all the way down. Both sides need to stop with the harsh rhetoric."

He said the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol left him feeling sad and disgusted.

"When our Capitol was attacked and entered, it reminded me of what I saw in the '70s," he said. "I'm a firm believer in the right to protest and make your voice heard, but to come armed with like an IED (improvised explosive device) like we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan ..."

He's hoping the nation can leave that kind of division in the rear-view mirror.

"I want President Biden to do well," he says. "Just like I wanted President Trump to do well and I wanted President Obama to do well."

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It may not be that easy.

According to national polls by Pew Research and Gallup, the United States has been a nation of ever-widening poles and a vanishing middle ground for more than a quarter of a

century.

A 2017 Pew survey found that more Americans identify as consistently liberal or conservative than at any time since 1994, while fewer identify themselves as holding positions at the center. A Gallup survey of nearly 10,000 Americans that same year found much the same thing.

“... Americans' party identification has become an increasingly powerful lens through which they view the world around them, as Republicans and Democrats over the years have increasingly diverged in their opinions on a number of important policy and social issues,” the Gallup analysis found.

“The reasons for this increased polarization are complex, but the implications are potentially profound,” the analysis concluded. “Elected officials, who themselves increasingly represent more polarized constituents, will find it harder to work in a bipartisan way to address challenges and develop policy solutions when the people of the country hold substantially differing positions based on their party identification.”

Both surveys were conducted in the early days of the Trump administration, and the trends have done nothing but accelerate.

A 2019 Pew survey found significant gaps in views across a wide variety of issues, and late last year, a 2020 analysis found that the COVID-19 pandemic had helped widen those gaps even further.

And though it seems the U.S. is as divided as it has ever been, there have been turbulent times before. The Civil War was the nadir of political division, followed by the well-chronicled rifts of Reconstruction. But there have been other fraught times in the nation's history. Government corruption and violent responses to work strikes were hallmarks of the so-called Gilded Age around the end of the 19th century, and tear gas filled the streets of nearly every U.S. city during the Vietnam and civil rights protests of the 1960s and 1970s.

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At age 25, Christian Hernandez is too young to remember those protests, but he remembers other big events in his life, like the 9/11 terror attacks, and the financial meltdown of the late 2000s. And he remembers the impact of Arizona's infamous SB 1070 anti-immigration act of a decade ago, especially the effect it had on his immigrant family.

Hernandez lives with his mother and sister across the street from Hudson in the house with the Biden sign in front. His mother emigrated from Mexico City when he was 3 years old, and they have lived in the neighborhood for about two years.

He says he's never experienced overt racism personally, but he feels he is often stereotyped as poor simply because of his Mexican heritage.

He works as a cashier at a grocery store and says he's fortunate to have a good job. He's saving money to go to school to become a veterinary technician.

Hernandez says the Biden sign was his sister's idea. She's 20 and a nursing student at Arizona State University. They put it up because they opposed President Trump's harsh policies on immigration, particularly the separation of children from their parents at the border.

It's what propelled him to the polls for the first time in his life in November.

Like Hudson, he was deeply disturbed over the riot at the Capitol in Washington, which he watched unfold on Twitter and YouTube feeds on his phone.

"It's kind of scary," he says. "It just makes you worry, there's a lot of anger out there, but most of us can't do anything about it."

Like Hudson, he too is at a loss over how, or even if, the U.S. can find its way back to the center.

He thinks a good start would be for better communication without the anger, and for government to move faster, to break the gridlock.

"A lot of people said that they like Trump because he does things quickly," he says.

On the other hand, people are frustrated because they haven't been able to get the COVID vaccine quickly enough, and he hopes the new Biden administration will be able to fix that.

It's an issue that is deeply personal. Earlier this month, he spent 10 days in the hospital with the virus and has only recently been able to return to work.

While he understands people's frustrations, he thinks the deep anger and hate that garner a lot of media attention aren't representative of the whole country, and that gives him hope for the future.

“There's like extremist people that are angry at other people and have violent sides,” he says. But he frequently interacts with people on the opposite end of the political spectrum from him in his job, “and they're pretty nice people. It's not like they hate you and you're going to hate them.”

He says he thinks the nation's problems are bigger than one person.

“Most people don't say Joe Biden is going to save us or Trump's going to save us. They just say everything is shutting down. The whole world's going to chaos,” he says.

“I don't really think one person is here to give us all the answers.”



Nick Johnston lives two doors down from the Hernandez family, though they've never met. He's lived in the neighborhood for 11 years and bought his home from a company that bought it out of foreclosure.

He's an enthusiastic supporter of former President Donald Trump, which reflects his conservative upbringing in Gilbert.

Unlike Hudson and Hernandez, he's not optimistic that the country can find its center.

If it were to happen, he said the left side of the political aisle needs to take a good look at itself and quit imposing double standards instead of saying, “Well, this is what we say, and if you don't believe us, then you're in the wrong.”

As one example of a double standard, he's concerned that Democrats have been too silent about the damage done in Black Lives Matter protests. As another he said that after repeatedly calling for states to shut down over the COVID-19 pandemic, he thinks it's hypocritical for blue cities like New York to reverse course in the wake of Biden's election.

"Now that Biden's elected, it's OK to open things up?" he said.

While Johnston, who's 40, says he doesn't know anybody who's suffered anything more than flulike symptoms from the virus, it has affected him directly: He was furloughed from his job at an air bag manufacturing plant in Mesa for two months, and since he's returned to work, he's had to work six and seven days a week as the company has ramped back up.

Johnston said that if the country is to move to the center, impeachment proceedings against Trump should end now that he is out of office.

Johnston spent five years serving his country in the Navy and said that he, too, thought the Jan. 6 riots at the Capitol were an affront and “never should have happened.” But it should be considered in the context of the unrest across the country over the summer, which he said resulted in billions of dollars in property damage to public buildings and private businesses.

He has questions about why authorities didn’t act on the intelligence they had indicating problems were looming, and about why rioters seemingly were able to gain access to the Capitol so easily. He also questions whether media reports about members of Congress being minutes or seconds away from potential harm were overblown.

“It could have been a lot worse, but thankfully it wasn’t,” he says.

He said he understands why people are angry, but that many people simply react without taking the time to study the issues, which in turn helps conspiracy theories flourish.

“People don't know more about what they're angry about,” he said. “They're only getting little bits of information. They hear this little bit and then they get angry about that instead of looking farther into it and seeing what the whole story is.”

Johnston said he has deep concerns going forward about a number of key issues, namely the Second Amendment and illegal immigration.

He fears that with Democrats in charge, a wave of gun legislation will infringe on the rights of responsible gun owners, and he’s worried that an influx of immigrants will burden taxpayers if they have to provide food, housing and health care for them.

Johnston said he has no issue with people like his immigrant neighbors, “as long as they do it the right way.”

He’s even OK with their Biden/Harris sign.

“Everyone's got the right to their own political views,” he said. That's what's great about America. You can believe what you want, it doesn't affect me.”

He’s had to put his live-and-let-live philosophy to the test. His oldest daughter doesn’t agree with his political views at all.

“We don’t talk politics too much,” he says.



Politicians, pundits and political scientists have been asking whether the center can hold almost since "The Second Coming" was published in 1920. It was the subject of a Wall Street Journal editorial last February, and the subject of an Aspen Ideas Festival panel in 2019.

Yet Yeats scholar J.T. Barbarese, a professor at Rutgers University, said the poet had a very different idea of the center than what most Americans think of today.

Yeats was very much an elitist, Barbarese said, and he believed in institutions that perpetuated order, particularly existing class structures and monarchies.

"If Yeats were alive today, he probably would have voted for Donald Trump," Barbarese said.

After witnessing the chaos that engulfed Europe between 1916 and 1920, when the poem was published, Yeats saw the institutions he valued were crumbling all around him, Barbarese said.

Yeats was an occult spiritualist who had led a somewhat tortured life, which left him with an apocalyptic world view that in turn led him to embrace fascism, something he never renounced before he died in 1939.

"His vision of history was, 'History is constant conflict. You cannot avoid it.' And so what you have in the poem is constant conflict and everything is toppled," said Barbarese, who called Yeats the greatest person to write in English in the 20th century.

"This poem is about how things fall apart and what everyone does when things are falling apart," Barbarese said. "Obviously, I think you look for a center, you look for stability."

While stability may seem like a distant mirage in a divided 2021 America, some do see a way forward.

In an essay written in the days after the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, Notre Dame professor John Paul Lederach, a part-time Tucson resident who has done extensive work on conflict mediation in war-torn places like Northern Ireland and Central America, noted the loss of our "basic social contract."

In an interview with The Republic, he said one step toward finding a middle ground is to "re-humanize" each other by learning to "listen more with the heart than with the eyes."



"When we listen with our eyes," he said, "we first look to see who's saying something, and then we already have predetermined what our defense will be in reference to that."

Instead of listening with the purpose of forming a response or winning an argument, we should be listening to understand.

"When you're approaching it in a form that humanizes the situation ... (it) basically means you're going to listen from the direction of what has been this person's experience more than the particular content of what they may say."

Lederach said fear is often a barrier to bringing opposing sides closer together.

"One of the drivers of really toxic polarization is that it often comes with this deep push into fear that if we lose here, we lose absolutely everything," he said. "And those have often translated into far more extremist views and often are the justification of, you know, defunding or violence or other things."

When you humanize the experience of the person at the other pole instead of seeing them merely as the representation for the things you are against, you have a better chance of reducing the impact of their fear, he said.

"It often opens up more avenues of seeing each other in ways that are not mutually exclusive to the degree that it's an all or nothing game, that if you win, I lose everything," he said.

Lederbach said that from his experience at peace-building in conflict zones around the world, the best place to start is often at the local level, like a small neighborhood in central Mesa.

"In a lot of the places that people faced difficult armed conflict, I was always struck by the simplicity of some of what they did, he said, "which was quite often this notion of good neighborliness."

Working together on issues that opposing sides have in common, particularly small, localized issues, is one way to bring people together and express the idea that they have a shared future together.

Even something as simple as meeting someone for coffee on a regular basis can be a start, he said.

"You're not doing it to win an argument. You're going in it because you're actually developing a relationship that is concerned about the wider complexity of each person's life and what's going on with them. And that's part of what I think is at the fundamental basis of our social contract."

For Hudson, the man in the middle in his Mesa neighborhood, it makes sense to also find common ground on the big problems, starting with the pandemic, a broken health care system and ongoing issues with an economy that has left too many people behind.

"You could spin a wheel of problems and throw darts at it and every one that hits is a major problem," he said. "We have to stop and start all over, calm down and work towards what is good for society in general."

"This is really at a tipping point," he said. "This is as close to civil war in the United States that I've ever seen in my lifetime, and I'm hoping we can back off that recipe."

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