

Peter D. Ladd: The role of emotional climate in understanding violence in America

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By PETER D. LADD

CANTON — As many have discussed lately, the United States is on edge. And violence in Louisiana, Minnesota and Texas clarifies the sharpness of this edge.

Many have stated that something must change to curb the violence — but where do we start?

Experts discuss gun reform, Black Lives Matter, police retraining and efforts to come together as a nation. Yet we are indirectly affected by one experience that seems to reach all of us, and this experience may have a dramatic impact on serious remedies to stop a country on edge.

The experience I am talking about is invisible and felt rather than seen. It is not only attached to any group or person. It affects every one of us by gaining momentum through social media.

It lurks in the background and seems to get attention only when tragedy ripples strong emotions across our nation, and it continues to affect our emotional landscape in attempts to control violence in our country. It is our collective experience of something referred to as an emotional climate (“Mediation, Conciliation, and Emotions: The Role of Emotional Climate in Understanding Violence and Mental Illness” by Peter D. Ladd and Kyle E. Blanchfield, Lexington Books, 2016), and it is transforming our society, through climates of hatred, anxiety and fear.

For example, during the 2015–16 presidential election, the emotional climate in our country began to shift. A climate of fear and anxiety became more noticeable, and in some circles a climate of hatred added to this fear and anxiety.

This invisible force called the emotional climate is the “ether” enveloping any given conflict (“Building the Emotionally Learned Negotiator,” Erin Ryan, *Negotiation Journal*, April 2006). An overriding climate of negative emotion can dramatically affect how people feel, leading to how they resolve problems with each other.

Sometimes the climate is bigger than the people in it (“Mediation, Conciliation and Emotions: A Practitioners Guide to Understanding Emotions in Dispute Resolution” by Peter D. Ladd, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), and changing the climate may be the first step to political and social solutions to curb violence. Changing the emotional climate is our first step to dealing with issues such as race, gun violence and a nation divided.

One example is the hatred, fear and anxiety demonstrated in Orlando and Dallas. Our response as a nation was to create a climate of compassion leading toward empowerment and safety.

We reached out to each other and came together in the spirit of good will. Combining a climate of compassion with forms of empowerment and safety can overshadow fear, anxiety and hatred.

Yet it must be noted that good will has a fairly short shelf life without a strong sense of commitment. The window of opportunity is open, and it is the time to create a positive emotional climate before a serious discussion about violence in America can take place.

A positive emotional climate is our common ground that precedes serious discussion. We have an opportunity to change the present emotional climate with one more fitting to a democracy.

The danger to all of us can be demonstrated in other parts of the world where the emotional climate of fear, anxiety and hatred, over time, turned countries with strong traditions into cultures filled with violence. Our democracy is better than that. Following in the footsteps of other cultures, promoting violence is not a part of our national identity, regardless of the wars and civil unrest of recent years. Resolving violence needs an understanding of the power found in climates such as compassion, empowerment and safety, and this is where the dialogue should begin. The leaders of our country need to address the emotional climate directly and bring it out into the open.

Any effective mediator or conciliator will say, "You need to address the emotional climate found in any dispute before a successful negotiation on issues can take place." The hope is that leaders such as President Barack Obama, former President George W. Bush and other prominent leaders can help gain momentum in changing a climate of hatred into one of compassion or changing a climate of fear and anxiety into a climate of safety.

Yet we stand by while negative emotional climates have gained momentum in our country. It is time to gather around a climate that lends itself to commitment through negotiation. Trying to solve problems confronting our nation without polarized groups buying into changing the current emotional climate leaves us attempting to solve problems without first establishing our common ground. And what is the common ground that transforms a negative emotional climate into a positive one? Leaders in our country need to remind us of our historical identity. We need to be reminded of why we became a country in the first place.

Democracies are built on a strong sense of identity, and the negative emotional climate that fuels current violence has clouded that identity. Discussions of identity for a country in crisis is an opportunity to change the emotional climate by going back to our roots.

Our beliefs lead to our behavior. Have we let a negative emotional climate to indirectly erode our beliefs? Are we afraid to admit where we came from and who we are?

Democracies thrive on an emotional climate that considers compassion, empowerment and a commitment to working on everyone's safety. For the sake of our current emotional climate, let us identify ourselves and openly make a commitment to what we stand for.

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