

The three tribes of America, in conflict

By Jim Nowlan

Warning: The following includes broad, some might say simplistic, generalizations. I also ascribe perceptions by groups of people that certainly don't hold in all cases. Yet I consider both the generalizations and perceptions overall to be important in understanding America society today.

The people of small Norway and Finland belong, respectively, to a single "tribe," if you will.

In each case, and in other northern European nations as well, the citizens have mostly sprung from the same stock. They are almost "family," one might say.

As such, Norwegians and Finns find it proper and easy to use community and government to support fellow family members when they might stumble for a while in the game of life.

In contrast, Americans belong, basically, to three tribes—white, black, brown.

No American tribe fully trusts the other tribes.

The black tribe resents the white tribe for oppressing it throughout our history, first as slaves, then as indentured servants, always denied the full rights of America.

At the same time, blacks are wary of the brown tribe for muscling in over the past century, just at the time blacks might have otherwise gained a better economic foothold.

The brown tribe looks down in collective nose at blacks for not always taking good advantage of opportunities for work they have been presented over recent decades. And browns see whites as wanting to send those browns here illegally back to their home countries.

The dominant white tribe admits belatedly that it overstepped the bounds of humanity in oppressing blacks.

Yet whites today see blacks as ungrateful for failing in so many cases to take advantage of opportunities put in their laps in the 1960s by president Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty social welfare policies.

Whites are also wary of the browns. Whites appreciate the work ethic of the browns in taking on fieldwork and service jobs that make life easier for all. At the same time, whites worry that the prolific browns want to smother the whites in the decades to come.

This tribalism has become embedded in American political party politics.

Since Bill Clinton's presidency in the 1990s, the Democratic Party has adopted a strategy of winning elections by capturing nearly all the votes of the black and brown groups.

In doing so, the Democratic Party has, I think, often ignored the feelings and concerns of many hard-working whites who had earlier formed the basis of that party. Democrats have lost many, maybe most of these whites.

At the same time, many Republicans, though they would deny this vigorously, are not comfortable with the idea of big numbers of blacks and browns in their party.

The often rich leaders of the white GOP have cleverly kept fellow whites, often located further down the economic pyramid, in the party by appealing to their social conservatism on matters such as abortion, gun rights and even the freedom of religion.

But many struggling whites have watched quietly, until 2016, as those at the top, often big Republican donors, exported their good jobs overseas, without a soupcon of compassion for their plight.

As a result of all this tribalism and white intra-tribe insensitivity, two formerly great political party establishments have, respectively, lost much of their white component (Democratic Party) or are now in jeopardy of losing their loyal white base (Republican Party).

But where do the disaffected white Democrats and disillusioned white Republicans go?

The Democrats are tightly in thrall to the blacks and browns.

Yet Democratic leaders simply don't seem to have a plan to appeal to their once-loyal white base.

Nor do Republicans know how to re-engage with their own white base on economic issues.

Alas, a big swath of the American public seems caught in the switches of a transforming global economy, which is rewarding very the high-end and well-educated, and dismissing most of the rest of us.

Thus Sanders and Trump.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan and progressive Republicans, as embodied by Teddy Roosevelt, tried to overturn the conservative barons of their respective parties, but couldn't quite do so (Bryan) or not for long (Roosevelt).

We may be close to the creation of a new populist party that could conceivably overthrow one (both?) of the major parties, just as in the 1850s an upstart Republican Party replaced, in remarkably short order, the feckless Whigs.