

Political Outrage Machine Runs at Full Tilt

By Gerald F. Seib

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Two months after the Jan. 6 mob attack on the Capitol, ugly fencing still surrounds the area, and Capitol Police have asked National Guard troops to remain on patrol for two more months. In Minneapolis, authorities are erecting their own barbed-wire fences in anticipation of trouble around the trial of the former police officer accused of killing George Floyd.

Asian-Americans are the targets of an escalating series of physical assaults. Four women at a Bath and Body Works store in Arizona got into a wild brawl Saturday over social distancing, the video of which immediately went viral.

As all that suggests, the national mood seems to be one of outrage. There are legitimate reasons to be angry, yet something else also is at work here: the emergence of a kind of perpetual outrage machine, made up of people and institutions with a vested interest in stoking political anger. Political consultants and the candidates who hire them, online advertising firms, social-media companies, cable-television hosts -- all profit one way or the other from stoking anger.

"What is it that causes people to want to be in a state of perennial outrage?" asks Pete Wehner, who was a political adviser to former President George W. Bush. "They are eager to be offended."

It's hard to know where to find answers, but let's begin with political advertising. Political consultants have made a ton of money in recent decades blanketing the country with television ads telling voters, essentially, that Washington is broken, their representative is part of the reason, and they should be mad about it.

Pushing this message is profitable, made all the more so by the emergence of national online fund-raising that enables even obscure candidates to use ideologically charged appeals to raise millions from distant donors interested only in bringing a new combatant into the fight. The Washington Post recently told the story of a Republican congressional candidate with virtually no chance of winning in a deeply Democratic Baltimore district who nevertheless raised more than \$8 million nationally -- nearly half of which went to a single media firm.

This helps produce an unvirtuous cycle. The outrage makes it harder for lawmakers to compromise, because they know the ferocity of the attacks they'll face if they do so. That leaves a lot of the playing field to activists on the left and right, whose actions in turn only anger their ideological foes all the more. It's a kind of perpetual-motion outrage machine.

There's a lot of fuel devoted to keep this machine going. The Wesleyan Media Project found that more than 4.9 million television ads aired in House, Senate and presidential races in the 2020 cycle, more than twice the volume of ads in the 2012 and 2016 cycles.

Those TV ads are supplemented by a flood of online ads, which are especially effective at stoking anger because they convey messages targeted at individual voters with known profiles suggesting their own, personal hot buttons. Figures from Kantar Media indicate that spending on digital political ads ballooned to \$1.7 billion in the 2020 cycle, well more than double four years earlier.

Other forces feed the trend. Social-media networks have become outrage machines of their own, drawing a growing share of the citizenry into the fighting. In the parlance of social-media sites, a person who disagrees with you isn't merely wrong but "asinine." Those on the left are communists and socialists, those on the right are fascists and nazis. That also feeds a profitable business.

Meantime, outrage has become virtually the business model of some cable television shows. Journalists have learned that stoking the outrage can translate into a lot more online clicks and views for their articles and videos.

Former President Donald Trump was, of course, a master at stirring outrage, and he rode the resulting wave all the way into the White House. But it didn't start with him; he was more an "accelerant" of an existing trend, says Mr. Wehner. On the left, Sen. Bernie Sanders ran two highly competitive presidential campaigns fueled in some measure by outrage.

On the other hand, President Biden won by promising to push back against this tide of outrage, perhaps offering hope of breaking the cycle. Yet he contributed to the heat last week by accusing governors lifting coronavirus mask mandates of engaging in "Neanderthal" thinking. Meanwhile, Republicans are outraged that, despite talk of unity and bipartisanship, Democrats have pushed through his \$1.9 trillion virus aid bill on entirely party-line votes in Congress.

John Podesta, a former Democratic White House chief of staff, argues that Mr. Biden's approach still could be an "analgesic." Yet the fever runs high. What's needed are some examples of political figures who succeed without the outrage.