

Upfront

We went away for July 4th weekend. To California, the place you see in/on “the news” a lot.

Maybe you’re like us. One of the first things you do each morning is switch on the TV or click a news app on your phone. Before a window shade is raised, the room glows with the light of information. It’s the virtual sun that signals the beginning of the day. Its tone influences the remainder of our waking hours. Its messages, both subtle and not so, inform our actions, our choices, our relationships, our chosen realities...every aspect of our lives.

As I sat to write this, I scanned my email inbox. “Mall Shooting Politicized” was the subject line, timestamped 6:12 a.m., courtesy of a local digital source. I took the bait...not looking to learn about the incident itself but inclined towards disagreement with the premise of the piece.

My predisposition: Somebody opened fire in a public place and people were harmed physically or psychologically, or both. Shooting a person is bad. Menacing the community is bad. There is no nuance in that, regardless of philosophical slant.

Nevertheless, we politicize everything. And then we write about politicizing everything, because we know more about human nature than we realize. By creating opportunities to align with or reject things, we provide ourselves with means of affirmation and connection – things that we crave. Never mind that the connection requires us to intransigently reject half of the world.

Google “Texas flooding deaths politicized.” The first three things you get: Fox News – “Outrage on social media over liberals criticizing flood disaster”; The Guardian – “Republicans toe Trump line even in aftermath of deadly Texas floods”; The Hill – “Fatal floods in Texas draw howls from Dems over Trump cuts.” And, farther down the list, from Newsweek, “Are Donald Trump’s NOAA Cuts to Blame for Texas Flood...” (I find it curious that Newsweek would modify Trump with Donald but abbreviate NOAA, by the way...we all know his first name; fewer of us are conversationally familiar with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, I suspect...but that’s the editor in me.)

I admit it: My instinct is to jump into the debate, even if it’s isolated to the voices inside my head. Did you know that Trump’s proposed \$2.2 billion in decreased funding allocations to NOAA are connected to a proposed budget for FY 2026 (aka the future)? FY 2025’s budget, the governing structure under which we currently live, is a Biden-era product. Per Columbia Law School’s Climate Change Center, Biden’s budget “decrease(d) overall funding for NOAA by 2.4% (versus the previous year) and drastically cut several key programs.” But I’ve fallen

into the partisan trap. Even though I’ve sourced genuine, unretouched information, I’ve entered the public back-and-forth. And some of you will knee-jerk assume I’m making an argument in support of or opposition to a particular party ideology. And some of you who believe you inherently disagree with me will write me to chastise me for sharing what you believe to be my opinions, mostly because you suspect they ostensibly differ from your own.

Yet, here’s the cold, indifferent (to your preferences or mine) reality: A father attempted to paddle a kayak in raging waters to save his 11- and 13-year-old daughters who were found dead and holding hands about 12 miles downriver. He soon thereafter discovered he had lost his parents, too. This is one of many horrible stories, in a world full of daily tragedies. If your impulses compel you to digest this report with anything more complicated than profound sadness, you probably lack the capacity for pure joy, too. I’m not indicting you...I constantly remind myself to course-correct in this regard, lest I devour my own soul from the inside.

Back to July 4th. When I opened the hotel room closet, I realized I had forgotten to pack appropriate clothes. No red. One pair of yellow sneakers, another green. I settled on khaki shorts and a black polo, and we stepped out to stroll along San Diego Bay. It was morning; 12 hours from the first fireworks “bang.” Shelter Island’s banks were already packed with people. None of them in khaki and black. I felt like an atheist at the Vatican. I hustled back to our room and found a blue shirt (azure and long-sleeve, unfortunately) and white jeans.

These thousands – the ones with flags on their sweaters and streamers in their hair...who were they? Everybody, actually. Choose a demographic; it was well represented in this crowd. One woman’s red, white, and blue outfit was so ambitiously adorable that Jenna paid her a warm compliment. The woman smiled patriotically and proudly and enthusiastically thanked Jenna in her non-English native tongue.

When darkness fell and the show began over the water, every eye pointed skyward. Each gaze was hopeful. Nobody focused a condemning stare on the stranger to his right or left. There was a common, universal language, comprised mostly of “oohs” and “aahs.”

The next day, we played bingo. Surely, it would be safe to wear pink. But table after table was a blur of Old Glory’s three familiar hues.

I get the sample biases. The fireworks crowd self-selects, in a way. And bingo is a capitalist endeavor: investment, risk, possible return. But to be an unabashedly grateful American in San Diego last weekend warmed my heart, just as the thought of a father losing his girls broke it.

We are humans, first. We are Americans, too. Both are precious gifts to be treasured, each day of every year.

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