

RICHARD: Americans disagree on a lot of things. There's nothing wrong with that, but are we having the wrong kind of conflict?

ASHLEY: Yeah, conflict that goes around in circles and is much more about scoring points than seeking resolution or making real change.

AMANDA: Fear, a fear of not belonging, a sense of humiliation, those are the things that help us understand how we got where we are and how to get out as opposed to: big government or small? I mean, that is just not where we're at, unfortunately.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Many of our debates and disagreements are being manufactured by conflict entrepreneurs.

ASHLEY: That's one of the main arguments of our guest, journalist and author Amanda Ripley. her books include High Conflict and The Smartest Kids in the World. Amanda is a trained conflict mediator and a less well-trained youth soccer coach in Washington, D.C.

RICHARD: One of her articles for The Washington Post caught our eye recently. It's called "We Keep Moving from One Wrong Fight to Another. Here's How to Stop."

ASHLEY: Amanda Ripley, thanks so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground .

AMANDA: Thanks for having me, Ashley. It's good to be here.

ASHLEY: So let's start with a simple question that may invite a long answer, which is: is America having too much conflict, or is it the wrong type of conflict?

AMANDA: You know, I feel like having spent a few years now following people who have been immersed in conflict, who study conflict, who themselves have been stuck in conflict, I am increasingly convinced that the problem is not conflict, that we need conflict. We probably need more conflict. But the kind of conflict really matters.

So the kind of conflict we've been stuck in tends to be conflict for conflict's sake. It's counterproductive. It poisons relationships. It shuts down useful friction. So the kind of conflict really matters. I like to think of it as roughly two kinds of conflict. One is high conflict, which is sometimes called malignant conflict. And the other is what I like to call good conflict, which is basically the kind of conflict that makes us stronger, where we can challenge each other and be challenged. That's the kind I think we need more of.

RICHARD: We'd like to ask you for examples of both types of conflict. Tell us about a case of high conflict, or bad conflict.

AMANDA: Actually, the phrase "high conflict" comes from family law because, in the '80s, divorce lawyers noticed that about a quarter of American divorces were stuck in sort of perpetual cycles of blame and hostility, and they were causing a lot of suffering for everybody involved, especially to kids, obviously. So they termed those "high-conflict divorces," where conflict distills into an us-versus-them feud, where you're increasingly baffled and enraged by the other side, and you feel morally superior.

Another example would be there's a kind of notorious case in England where the large family of adult siblings fought over an inheritance which was quite large, millions of pounds. And they fought over it for so long that they got to zero because they were spending so much on legal fees. Then, in politics, we see it all the time, where we know—I think there was a recent survey that 95% of congressional staffers said that important things that could be done that everyone agreed on were not getting done because of polarization.

So that would be an example where the conflict itself has created its own reality, and everybody suffers to different degrees, whereas good conflict would be a situation where people do genuinely disagree. They able to say so, and they're able to push each other. You can, again, see this with couples. The best research on this is probably by John and Julie Gottman, who study marital conflict at the Love Lab in Seattle. And what they've found is that couples who are more resilient do not have less conflict, but the conflict they have tends to be the kind that makes you stronger. It's the kind of conflict where there are some guardrails. So there's less contempt, but anger is okay; less disgust, but fear and sadness are okay. And it's the kind of conflict where curiosity still exists, so they can still be surprised by each other in an argument, which seems to be kind of a prerequisite to good conflict.

ASHLEY: And at the national level, what does good conflict look like?

AMANDA: We've seen—even now, we see a ton of good conflict. An example that I recently wrote about in The Post is about a committee in Congress called the Select Committee on Modernization, which was able to get 202 bipartisan recommendations passed despite being evenly divided, six Republicans, six Democrats. So they were really, on the face of it, set up to fail. If you were placing bets, you would not have bet on them because they required a super majority of two-thirds of their members to get anything done. And they did disagree on a lot of things. So they were able to do that, and they were able to push each other, and they were able to ask questions of the witnesses and each other and kind of hear the answers. Neither side got everything they wanted, but the end result was something that could actually endure.

RICHARD: I want to give a plug for one of our podcasts for a moment, and that is we did an interview with the chair and vice-chair of that committee, Derek Kilmer, the Democrat, and William Timmons, a Republican. And you're absolutely right. It was fascinating to see how they worked together.

AMANDA: I'm so glad you did that. They used to joke that they're the most scheduled, most canceled couple in politics because CNN would schedule them and then cancel them because some breaking news would occur. But you didn't cancel, so that's awesome.

RICHARD: We didn't cancel. I'm glad that when you were discussing high conflict and good conflict, Amanda, you mentioned something that wasn't political. You mentioned marriages or relationships. I think that, so often, we think of the problems with polarization in America as being political, whereas they're broader than that, aren't they?

AMANDA: I think at this level of conflict, it's much more about emotion than it is about policy or even politics. You can't cleanly separate those things. They all interact. But, increasingly, the behavior of voters and politicians is much, much easier to understand when you look at it through a psychological lens than if you look at it through a policy lens or a political lens. It's about belonging. It's about fear of the other side. We know that a majority of people in presidential elections are voting against the other side rather than just for their side. So the level of fear and threat has been ginned up to such an extent that people will vote for almost anyone as opposed to the other side. Fear, a fear of not belonging, a sense of humiliation, those are the things that help us understand how we got where we are and how to get out as opposed to: big government or small? I mean, that is just not where we're at, unfortunately.

ASHLEY: Well, one of the problems we have in this country is that Democrats often have the wrong impression of exactly what it is that conservatives believe. Republicans have a false view of what liberals and progressives stand for. Can you give us a couple of examples of those mistaken beliefs on both sides?

AMANDA: Yeah. There's a lot of great research on this. I think the best organization that does this is called More in Common. What they keep finding is that, yeah, we have a kind of caricatured view of each other, and the more you think the other side is a buffoon or a villain, the more you do things that lead the other side to become a buffoon or a villain. So it's a little bit of a trap.

But to give an example, most Democrats tend to think that Republicans are much richer and much more cruel about the poor and immigrants than they actually are in survey after survey after survey. Most Republicans think that Democrats are much greater numbers of minorities than they are. They tend to think they're mostly much bigger percentage of gay people than they are, and they tend to think that they are antagonistic towards America in a way that they are not.

So, in fact, your average Democrat and your average Republican are white, straight Christians. That doesn't mean they agree. They don't agree on important things. There are lots of differences beyond that, and there are important groups within Democrats and Republicans. But it is just really hard to generalize in this way, and your brain will try to trick you. I know I catch myself doing it all the time. I generalize about 70 million people who voted a certain way in a certain election. You would not do that about another country. You would not be like, "Oh,

I understand the hearts and souls of 70 million people I've never met." But somehow, when you're in this kind of conflict, it's very tempting to do that.

RICHARD: So how do we avoid falling into the trap of believing the worst of those we disagree with? What are a couple of ways?

AMANDA: One is relationships, like continually going out into the world and having conversations with those guardrails, with a sense of curiosity to try to get underneath: what is motivating this? How do you know what to believe? Asking different questions, that's the kind of thing that I focus a lot on in training journalists and in my own work. The second way is through good data like the research that More in Common does. They have a really nice quiz on their site right now where you can test your own knowledge of the other side, whatever that may be, when it comes to what they call the "history wars," about how to teach America's racial history. It's just a nice way to use data to get a little bit of a reality check about what people are actually saying and thinking.

ASHLEY: Talking of the history wars, you know, the Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, has emerged as a potential frontrunner among Republicans expected to run for president in 2024. He's been talking a lot about being anti-woke. Do you think there's a danger that the culture wars could actually get a new stage of intensity between now and the next presidential election?

AMANDA: For sure. The problem with polarization is that you're very vulnerable to being manipulated. But when a country is very polarized, and there's a lot of anxiety, part of which has been ginned up on purpose and part of which is real, based on real threats and uncertainty, then you're really vulnerable to conflict entrepreneurs and other forces that are benefiting from the conflict in different ways. DeSantis is in that category where he is quite sensitive to the words to use and the ways to make people feel afraid of their fellow Americans. He's not the only one, but I think that is clearly a path that could lead us to a darker place, for sure.

RICHARD: You mentioned the phrase "conflict entrepreneurs." What do you mean by that? Are these people who profit out of juicing up our conflicts, who make money out of it or fame or get political power?

AMANDA: Yeah, conflict entrepreneurs are people or platforms or companies who exploit conflict for their own ends. So sometimes it's for the reasons you mentioned like profit and power. Just as often, I've found it's for more subtle forms of power like a sense of being important, getting people's attention, feeling like you matter. All of those things are very powerful, we know, in a way that maybe we didn't 50 years ago. But the research shows that the need to belong, the need to feel like you have influence are very strong drivers of human behavior, and we've now created a bunch of institutions, including social media, in order to raise up and amplify and celebrate conflict entrepreneurs.

ASHLEY: In all your work writing about and reporting on conflict and division, what have you learned personally from talking to so many people who disagree about a lot of things?

AMANDA: I've learned that everything I thought I knew about persuasion, about how people change their mind, how people make decisions, including myself, much of it was wrong. I think I've come to downgrade, unfortunately, the role of argument and facts in persuading people because, especially when there is emotion involved, that's just not how people change their minds. And that is a hard journey to take because, for me, as a journalist, I thought that if I could just find the facts and make them look pretty, I could have impact in this world. And I think, if you still think that, you haven't been paying attention. Those things matter, but that's not all that matters. And the more conflict you're in, the less they matter. So figuring out how to not just look at facts but also look at emotion, ask different questions, listen more deeply to people, and always stay humble and curious, that is the challenge that I think I'll be working on for the rest of my life. It's a hard challenge, but I feel like I am not longer sort of naively attached to the role of facts in journalism.

ASHLEY: We've been speaking with Amanda Ripley on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. We release new podcasts every couple of weeks, and we have more than 80 episodes on all kinds of ways to find common ground with a remarkable range of guests.

ASHLEY: And not all of them are about politics. We also look at what all of us can do to find common ground in our own lives.

RICHARD: We want to share with you new ideas that offer hope and inspiration instead of just being depressing.

ASHLEY: Find all our shows at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. Now, more of our interview.

RICHARD: We asked Amanda about her interest in conflict, both healthy and destructive. As a result of studying it, what changed for her as a journalist?

AMANDA: Anyone who made their career out of one of our existing institutions, whether you're a member of Congress or a policy analyst or a journalist or a scientist or an academic, any of those people have gone through the past 10 years and realized that they're not trusted by huge portions of the country. And that is very hard to know how to respond to. So part of it is I'm trying to figure out how to be useful, give in, that just doing more of the same doesn't seem to help.

ASHLEY: I'm curious. How much do you hear from readers in response to your work? Because sometimes when I read the comments section on any article along these lines, including some of your own articles, it's not particularly encouraging. It seems like people want to stay stuck in

their lanes. And I know we could go on forever about comments sections, online comments sections, but do you feel that you are forging a path and that people are listening and that people are changing their minds?

AMANDA: Well, this is the question, is: where do we go to listen, and how do we listen? So I think we could probably all agree that we need to listen to each other more, that journalists need to listen to their audiences more. Most people don't feel heard most of the time, and when people don't feel heard, they get louder and more extreme in their rhetoric. So we keep seeing this, and that's a vicious cycle.

RICHARD: So all three of us are journalists in this conversation, and something I've noticed is that a lot of newsrooms lack diversity, diversity in terms of how people view the world. One example came recently during the Oscars when Best Supporting Actor, Ke Huu Quan, in his acceptance speech, not only talked about being a refugee but also said that his story was an example of the American Dream, and people cheered. It was a really lovely moment. But the next morning, on the NPR report I heard, they cut off the sound bite just before Ke Huy Quan said that, and I thought it was kind of a missed opportunity.

AMANDA: Yeah. Yeah, that's a great example. There was a really good study. I know I sound like I'm working for them. I do not work for them, but again by More in Common, where they looked at: what do Americans actually share when it comes to their identity as an American? And one of the things they found was that 80% to 90% of every single demographic in this country is proud to be an American except one. Do you want to guess which one? It's highly engaged progressives. And guess who is more likely, not always, more likely making those decisions at NPR. Highly engaged progressives, right? So you don't know what you don't know. Among Black Americans, among Latino Americans, they all have really high scores on being proud to be an American. We can argue about whether they're right or wrong, but you know what? You can't disagree with that because that's up to them. And so not knowing that would lead you to cut that clip in that way. So I feel like—it's funny. You need a diverse group of people in these newsrooms and not just racially but also politically. If you want to represent the country, you got to represent the country, and you don't have to do it in every single way, but if half the country is leaning Right, you got to have those people on the air, and you got to have those people in the newsroom. That's a great example of a lost opportunity that also just shows a tin ear about what most Americans are thinking about.

ASHLEY: We've been talking about internal conflict in personal relationships, politics, journalism. What about something from the outside like the war in Ukraine or growing tensions with China? Could they create a chance for unity on foreign policy and national security?

AMANDA: So you're saying that there's a common enemy, and is that potentially a way to—yeah. I mean, one of the oldest tricks in the book is to create a common enemy so that some of that energy can be directed away from the internal enemy towards the other. That can go either direction. I mean, I think we saw, in the early days of the pandemic, we had a common enemy. It was a virus, and there was a period of several months of just extraordinary cohesion

and big, sweeping bipartisan measures getting passed in Congress, a real sense of neighborliness, a sense we were all in this together.

Now, I think every single country, eventually that faded because just the duration of the pandemic was such that you just can't sustain that. But ours ended more quickly than other countries' because of our preexisting distrust and because of the way we are so easily manipulated. So I think that's the problem. You have to have a baseline level of trust with each other and your institutions before that kind of common enemy will really create sustainable coherence. We saw it after 9/11. You can also do a lot of damage when you have a common enemy. So there is a way to think about these conflicts more strategically that is informed by human behavior and conflict. But I'm not sure that it's going to be the common enemy path.

RICHARD: Earlier in the interview, you were talking about the work, the very good work of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress and the really warm relationships between leading Republicans and Democrats on that committee. What role can understanding and empathy play in reducing divides.

AMANDA: Yeah. That's a great example of where, especially after January 6th, the chair of that committee, Congressman Kilmer, did not have any hope that they would be able to get anything done because there were six Democrats, six Republicans, and when he went and met with everybody, most of them felt like they did not want to be in the same room together, let alone working on bipartisan recommendations for modernizing Congress. So he did something. Sometimes that level of crisis sparks creativity. So he did a bunch of things differently with his vice chair, Congressman Timmons.

And one of the things they did, which I don't know of any other committee has done this, is they had an off-the-record, behind-closed-door, mediated, honest conversation about January 6th because there was just nowhere to go until they had that conversation. David Fairman, who facilitated that conversation, he asked them each, after they told their personal story of January 6th, which is always where you want to start with these conversations, they asked the next person to try to identify what seemed most important to the person who had just spoken. So there's a lot of ways to do this, but it's a way of proving you have heard the other person beyond a doubt with your words, and checking if you got it right. And this is so integral. It's like the skeleton key to any conflict, and you have to show people that you are listening even as you disagree.

So that's what they did, one by one. It's not like they suddenly agreed, but now they could get in the same room together. This is fundamental, and we see a lot of institutions—schools, school boards, churches, synagogues—that have not done this because conflict is scary, and we'd rather avoid it. But the level of conflict in a lot of these institutions today, especially after the pandemic, is such that you can't avoid it. It's going to come back to bite you one way or the other. So that is a really good example of one way to move forward.

ASHLEY: Amanda Ripley, talking with us about the difference between good conflict and what she calls high conflict.

RICHARD: And as we've been hearing, there's such a crucial difference between both. One is destructive, and the other can actually be pretty helpful. Finding common ground is not necessarily about agreeing with one another but really better listening.

ASHLEY: And respect for others, as well, and that is not happening as much as it should do. One of the things Amanda talks about is conflict entrepreneurs, you know, people who make money and gain power or become famous for attacking the other side.

RICHARD: Yeah, conflict entrepreneurs. It's such an interesting and thought-provoking term and a helpful way of looking at polarization.

ASHLEY: Something we discuss a lot on this podcast. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.