

ASHLEY: Journalist Judy Woodruff has been covering U.S. politics for more than 50 years.

RICHARD: And she says she's never seen the country or Congress as divided as it is now.

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

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Judy Woodruff has covered every presidential administration since Jimmy Carter. She moved to Washington D.C. in 1977 and has been there ever since reporting for NBC, CNN, and PBS.

ASHLEY: Most recently, she spent 11 years as anchor of the PBS NewsHour. In this episode, we speak with Judy about a big reporting project she's doing for the NewsHour called America at a Crossroads.

RICHARD: For the next year and a half, Judy plans to travel across the country and hear from all kinds of people, exploring our differences as well as learning how we can find common ground. The project will end with the 2024 election. Now, our interview.

ASHLEY: Well, Judy, first of all, thank you so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground with us today.

JUDY: It's just a delight to be with both of you. I've been looking forward to this conversation.

ASHLEY: So have we. So this reporting project, America at a Crossroads, is really personal to you. Why did you want to do it?

JUDY: Well, I've been a reporter covering American politics in one form or another for over 50 years going back to 1970 when I started out as a local reporter in Atlanta covering Georgia politics, Atlanta city politics. And then I came to Washington in 1977. So I've been here in this city where I'm talking to right now a long time. I'm still based here. So I've covered Democrats and Republicans, and they've had big fights over taxes and over immigration and just about everything you can think of. But today, it's not only that the two sides are farther apart and more dug-in, it seems to me, but there's just this anger and vitriol. It's here in Washington, but it's also around the country, and we see it in news coverage, we see it in the polling that's been done, and we see it in research that's been done.

So once I stepped down from the anchor desk, which I've been doing for 11 years at the NewsHour after working there for 26 years all together, I wanted to spend some time because I knew I was still healthy and active and still feel like a reporter, I wanted to go out and try to understand why that is. So I'm traveling around the country, interviewing ordinary Americans, extraordinary, ordinary Americans, interviewing scholars, people who've written about this to try to understand where we are and where we're headed.

RICHARD: Washington D.C. is divided. Our politics are extremely divided. In your reporting, did you get the impression from the people you've been speaking to that they are as divided as our politicians are.

JUDY: Yes, Richard, in many instances, they are. It doesn't mean all Americans are divided. Clearly, there are people in the middle who are watching all of this unfold, but there are, most clearly, people on the ends—the extreme ends in some cases,—of the ideological spectrum, who have very strong views and who think the other side is either completely wrong-headed or not listening to them, and that's at best and then, at worst, who think the other side is immoral, dishonest, and so on. So we are finding that.

Now, some of that's coming from research. I can't say that I've gone out and interviewed thousands and thousands of people yet and take my own survey, but we have talked to a number of folks at Pew Research Center, which does constant polling and research looking at where the American people are, and that's what we're finding, that people themselves, voters themselves, have now, many of them, adopted these very different views and, in many cases, dark views of the other side.

ASHLEY: I was going to ask you about your visit to Pew Research Center. What did they tell you about how the divisions in this country have changed over the years?

JUDY: Well, they trace it back. They look at where we were in the late '70s and then at the '90s, and they talk about how things stayed pretty much the same from the '70s up until the '90s. Then they said, in the '90s, you started to see this greater separation in people's views. And if you look at it, and I'm not doing a very good job of drawing a chart with my hand, but they said if you look at the early '90s, Americans were roughly here on the issues; Democrats here; Republican here on everything from the role of government, government spending, immigration, abortion, the so-called hot button issues. Today, Americans are farther apart. If you ask them on the same issues, the polls have moved. So that's part of it.

The other thing they looked at is where members of Congress are, and you know this because you watch American politics, the center has all but disappeared. You don't find conservative Democrats or moderate to liberal Republicans anymore. They've been not just a dying species; I think it's pretty safe to say they're extinct. And what's happened to them is that the parties have themselves moved farther to the extreme ends, and they just don't have the tolerance for people in the middle. You're not welcome. It's not rewarded if you're someone somewhat to the middle. If you want to work with the other party, there's no incentive to do that. And this is my own reporting, you're not rewarded. You're not given the committee assignment you want. You're not given money for your next campaign to run for reelection if you're seen as somebody who's an outlier. So you're rewarded if you are farther and farther to the extreme. There are few exceptions to that but not as many as we used to see.

RICHARD: And yet, on the issues—we did a very interesting podcast very recently with the leaders of the pro-choice and pro-life movements in Massachusetts. And it's clear that their views have not moderated at all and that they're diametrically opposed to one another. That's not surprising. They're leaders of their movements. But when you look on polling on abortion, it hasn't moved very much in the last 50 years when it comes to where the American people are. Most people favor some form of abortion rights but not without any limitations at all. So I just wonder whether, on the issues, people are as far apart as they think they are in terms of their partisan affiliations.

JUDY: I think some of this is a perception thing, and I think abortion, in a way, it's almost a special case because it is an issue that goes to the very core of our faith. For those of us who are connected with a particular religion, a particular faith, it may be connected to that. It may be a deeply, deeply held view as opposed to: what should the government spend on highways? So I put it in kind of a separate category, and my sense is that you're right. The public attitude hasn't changed that much, but when it comes to

the activists, the people who lobby one side or another, they are more vocal than ever. The pro-life movement is as active and vigorous and just out there, making their voices heard.

We saw that in the wake of the Supreme Court decision, the Dobbs decision last year, the reaction. There was rejoicing on the part of the pro-life movement, and then we've seen the opposite reaction on the part of those who represent choice. So it may be that the American people haven't moved a lot, but the movement, in my view—and you suggest this in your conversation with the leaders—is more dug-in than ever.

ASHLEY: Judy, you know when you were talking about the Pew research which showed that polarization between the two sides had really increased greatly since the '90s, did you talk about why that was?

JUDY: We did, and it isn't knowable, but the sense from talking to the folks at Pew is that it's a complex set of causes that range from the messages being sent from Washington, which is what people see in the news. There's no question, and we didn't discuss all of the reasons in great detail, but there's no question that the fact that we now get our news instantly, that we get so much of it from cable television, from the internet, social media, that opinions are being spewed by the second, by the nanosecond, the fact that people can now turn to their chosen source of news, now going around the country saying there's no more Walter Cronkites. People can choose from literally 1,000 or more different sources of news. They can get their news any way they want to, and they don't have to hear from the other side. If they choose to hear one side, they can.

But there's also the way we organize ourselves as people. It used to be we would identify as, "Well, where are you from?" and, "Where do you go to church?" or, "What books do you read?" or what book club you belong to, and so on, and other clubs you may be a part of. And today, more and more Americans identify themselves by their political party. They think of themselves as an R or a D. It's not everyone. We know that. There's still folks in the middle who resist this label, who want to be seen as independent. But many Americans do say, "I'm an R," or, "I'm a D," and they view that in a way that is oppositional to the other party.

ASHLEY: You said that, years ago, you and your husband used to attend Washington D.C. dinner parties where there would be Republican and Democratic politicians. Everyone got on, and that's almost unimaginable today. What did you talk about at those parties?

JUDY: I barely remember because it was a long time ago. I just know that we would have a good time. And it wasn't just the parties we attended. We would invite people over. We would have members of Congress or people who worked on the Hill or worked in an administration, and there would always be a mix of Republicans and Democrats. And we would talk about legislation. This is a very wonky kind of place, Washington D.C. We love it because we swim in all this stuff.

I remember there was a dinner where Dan Rostenkowski, who was a chair then of the House Ways and Means Committee, was there, and there were several Republicans in the group. And they had a very vigorous argument, voices were raised, over the minutiae of tax legislation. But they still had a good time. Everybody was having a great conversation. Yes, a little wine was enjoyed. But today, you just don't see that. You're very, very careful when you invite an R and a D to the same event.

RICHARD: Judy, in our last episode before this one with you, we spoke with Ted Johnson, as you did on your series, America at a Crossroads. Ted is African American and a military vet, and with us, he sounded

somewhat hopeful about patriotism and the ability of the military, at least, to bring people together. What did you learn from him about our racial conversation in America?

JUDY: Well, I learned a lot from him, and I'm so glad that you all spoke with him, as well. Race has been at the center of America's ideals from the very beginning, whether it was talked about or not. He went through with us, in a much more eloquent way than I'm sharing right now, how he sees that has happened and how he thinks it's so important to keep talking about it, to be much more transparent than we are about the story of race and the treatment of people of different races in this country. And just listening to him, again, somebody who had a distinguished career, retired as a commander in the Navy, but then went back to school, earned his doctorate, and then now is working principally as a journalist and writer and author—but I think, as much as Americans want to believe that the issue of race is behind us, that we fought the Civil War, we've been through the Civil Rights movement, it's still very much there. We see it in incidents. We see it in what's going on with school boards around the country. We spent time in Oklahoma just recently. We have a piece airing on the NewsHour about what's going on in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 100-and-a-couple years after the terrible race massacre there in 1921. So it's a story that keeps needing to be discussed out in the open.

RICHARD: You're listening to Judy Woodruff on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Judy's going to be continuing her work at America at a Crossroads right up until the next presidential election in November 2024, and if you don't catch it on the PBS NewsHour, you can always view these segments online at PBS.org. We'll post a link to the series in the show notes and on our website.

RICHARD: And our website is commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts, and we still want to know what you think of our shows. Tell us about the things you'd like to hear more of and less of. There's a link on our podcast page, again, at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: Now, more of our conversation with Judy Woodruff.

RICHARD: Judy, you mentioned the news media and the role it can play in dividing people. I witnessed something this morning while taking my grandson to school in New York outside P.S. 17 in Brooklyn, where he goes. A group of parents and kids protested against the use of the school gym to house recently arrived refugees. It was an emergency measure put in place by New York's mayor, but the kids lost their space for physical recreation and were understandably upset. The shouts and slogans from the parents were not aimed against the refugees, as far as I could tell. And it struck me because many of these parents were people of color and, quite probably, immigrants themselves in Brooklyn. So the media reports something like this as either you're for or against refugees, and it's often much more complicated than that. The small demonstration was an example, I think, of that nuance.

JUDY: Well, it is true that we, in the media, often reduce stories to their lowest common denominator in order to report them, and we also gravitate to conflict and dissension like a moth to flame. That's what makes a story so often. But listening to you, I would question—when you say it wasn't about the refugees, it still sounds as if it wasn't a crowd that was welcoming the refugees. So the press may not be reporting the nuance of it, of the exact what bothers the protestors, the families, the children. I guess I'd want to know more.

I hear what you're saying, that so often we reduce stories to the easiest piece of it to tell because we're trying to squeeze it into 20 seconds or 30 seconds or three minutes or two minutes or less, and we just don't have time for all that. So it's one of the reasons, frankly, that I love public media, because we do have a little more time than our commercial competitors. To me, this is a perpetual issue. When you have a media mindset that is about conflict, that's about, again, stressing the differences—you don't see news stories, "The planes all landed safely today." We don't cover that. It's the definition of news.

So I think one way we can address it is, as young journalists come along, to talk to them about how maybe it's important to think about reporting and the bigger picture, that it's not just in the moment, that fight. Try to get some nuance in there. Try to ask an extra question if you can. But the clock is not our friend in these things. People often ask me, "When you're doing an interview, why don't you do this, or why don't you do that?" And I say, "I've only got seven minutes total, five minutes, four minutes, three minutes, and I'm trying to cover two or three issues, and they're not answering the question. Then I've got to decide, am I going to pursue that or go to the next one?" So time is not always our friend, and people have to work with that.

ASHLEY: I'm going to go back in the other direction, sadly, toward polarization again, but I want to tell you something that happened to me at the weekend. I was driving through central Virginia toward northern Virginia on Route 81 and saw not one but two businesses flying large "F Biden" signs except the entire word was spelled out. And these are businesses. And you just wonder, what does this say about us that people feel perfectly content to fly such a flag publicly?

JUDY: That's such a good question, and it goes to our conversation a few minutes ago about how each side not only thinks the other side is wrong or wrong-headed or mistaken or has bad information, but that they are dishonest, immoral, lazy—personal, negative views about the other side that we didn't see. This is showing up in the Pew Research polling. It's showing up in virtually every bit of academic research that people just have a darker view of the other side. And what you're describing to me gets at this whole business of we're more coarse in our communication than we have been in the past.

And Americans were never—I keep being reminded by people who study the founding of the country that, well, back in the day, they used very nasty terms when Ben Franklin was writing about Thomas Jefferson and the rest of it. So, yes, there were some pretty nasty things said, but today, it's become profane. It's coarse. It's out there in the open. As you say, it's a flag and over a business, so that means the business owner isn't concerned about losing any customers who have a different point of view. I don't know how we put that genie back in the bottle.

Americans feel freer with social media, with Twitter, Facebook, and the rest of it to be just ugly—some Americans, thankfully not all, feel free to just be as nasty as they can be. And I see it in some reaction to the work I've done over the years. And I now just—it just rolls off your back, if it's directed at you. But it causes to just stop and think: how much farther down are we going to go?

ASHLEY: Going back to the topic of nuance for a moment, we've spoken to so many people on this show where there is a lot of nuance in their views. It's been wonderful to have that exposure when we hear so much about the extremes, right? And when you spoke to Pew, those statistics were focused on Red and Blue, Republicans and Democrats. We did a show recently where the subject was the independent voter, and we know that independents are about 40% of U.S. voters. So do you think we could actually be less divided than it appears?

JUDY: I think it's certainly possible. I do think in the polling, and I don't have the details of who was included and who wasn't, but I know that in polling, they will ask people, "Do you identify? Do you lean? Do you prefer?" They use different language to identify who is a Republican or who voted Republican before or who voted Democrat and how somebody thinks they are today, and there are gradations of that. There are people who are on the extremes, and then there are people who lean, and then there are the likelies and then the leans and then the maybes, and then the true center, the people who just say, "I'm not either one. I go back and forth from one election to the next."

I do think it's possible that there is this great middle out there, but there isn't a home for them in American politics. We are organized as a government system around these two parties that have amassed so much power and so much money. And when you think about the primary system, when you think about the debates that take place before a presidential election, when you think about how Congress is organized, it's the minority and majority. It's binary. Where's the room for the middle? Look at the United States Senate and the House. It's the majority and the minority, and it's all about who's got more votes. And the White House is occupied by either a Democrat or by a Republican so far in our modern history.

There have been independent attempts to run, as we know very well: Ross Perot, John Anderson, going back to the '80s. But we haven't seen an independent come really close, and that means independents have had to either hold their noses and vote for a party they weren't thrilled with or just not vote. And it may well be that if enough of the public is soured on who the Republican and the Democratic nominees are, then an independent would have a chance, but just so many things have to happen between now and then. I don't rule it out completely, Ashley, but I think I just recognize how difficult it is.

RICHARD: So perhaps, on Let's Find Common Ground, we're in a bridging bubble because we speak to a lot of people, a lot of organizations in the bridging movement who are pushing back against polarization, who are working to bring people of different backgrounds, different points of view together. Is this, in your view, a hopeless effort, or are there green shoots out there that we can grasp on to and promote?

JUDY: Oh, I definitely don't believe it's hopeless. I salute the bridging movement. I have hope that it can make a difference, and I know there are hundreds, if not thousands, I'm told, of these organizations around the country, some national, most or many of them local, grassroots. They're all trying to bring people together, get people just to listen to each other, have conversations, consider another point of view. I salute that. I think it's a great idea, and I wish them well.

So far, if you look at what's going on in Washington, I don't know that it's having a dramatic effect on policy or on our politics. I look at what's going on in state legislatures, more and more laws being passed to restrict what could be taught in schools and which children have access to which bathrooms and fights over books that should be banned, local arguments that have taken on the tenor of national debates. People have said to me, "Well, it's the noisy extremes that are getting all the attention," and no doubt that is part of the story here because the folks who speak up, who take a strong view—the woman or man who storms out of a school board meeting is the one who's going to make the news rather than the folks who showed up and sat quietly and listened and made some reasonable comment. But I think what is going on right now in terms of attempts at bridging are part of a longer-term effort that will take some time to unfold.

ASHLEY: As your reporting trips progress, are you hoping to speak to some common grounders, as we call them?

JUDY: Absolutely. We will, and in fact, we have plans right now. We are in the process of working on interviews with a group of people who have indicated that they believe in the bridging movement, they like what it's doing, and they're looking for ways to listen to the other side. So, yes, absolutely, we're doing that right now. We may have an interview like that coming up in the next few days. We're working on it.

RICHARD: Judy Woodruff, thank you very much for joining us.

JUDY: [phone rings] I'm turning that off. Just a second. Let me turn it off. Sorry.

RICHARD: Thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground. [phone rings] That's great.

ASHLEY: Maybe we should leave that in because it's a journalist's phone ringing.

RICHARD: Maybe we should leave it in. Yeah, there you go. You're always busy.

JUDY: I've so enjoyed this. Thank you very much. It's so great to be with both of you, and really appreciate the work you're doing to talk about where there are green shoots around the country because they do exist.

ASHLEY: Judy Woodruff, always in demand.

RICHARD: Yeah, and such a fascinating conversation. Judy's answer to your question about how many of us are much more coarse and even crude on social media and with our public pronouncements than used to be the case, I thought that was fascinating.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and I'm not sure how we can get that genie back in the bottle, although I would genuinely love to.

RICHARD: I'm left wondering, though, after our conversation, about whether the main divisions among Americans are over identity and how we see the other side rather than a significant shift in our views on the issues. With so many more people registering as independents, not calling themselves either Democrats or Republicans, it's possible that they're angry at both sides rather than just the other side.

ASHLEY: Yeah. I think that's true for a lot of people. I was reading the comments on an online article earlier today, and it was very clear that many people felt that the Left was, in many cases, too extreme, but they didn't identify with the new Republican party, either, so plenty of people who were sort of fuming online because of that.

RICHARD: And that's our show for this week. Again, you can watch all of Judy's work on America at a crossroads at PBS.org.

ASHLEY: We'll post a direct link to the series in the show notes in the show notes and at our website. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: With Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.