

## [Former NPR CEO opens up about liberal media bias](#)

By [Ken Stern](#)

Most reporters and editors are liberal — a now dated Pew Research Center poll found that liberals outnumber conservatives in the media by some 5 to 1, and that comports with my own anecdotal experience at National Public Radio. When you are liberal, and everyone else around you is as well, it is easy to fall into groupthink on what stories are important, what sources are legitimate and what the narrative of the day will be.

This may seem like an unusual admission from someone who once ran NPR, but it is borne of recent experience. Spurred by a fear that red and blue America were drifting irrevocably apart, I decided to venture out from my overwhelmingly Democratic neighborhood and engage Republicans where they live, work and pray. For an entire year, I embedded myself with the other side, standing in pit row at a NASCAR race, hanging out at Tea Party meetings and sitting in on Steve Bannon’s radio show. I found an America far different from the one depicted in the press and imagined by presidents (“cling to guns or religion”) and presidential candidates (“basket of deplorables”) alike.

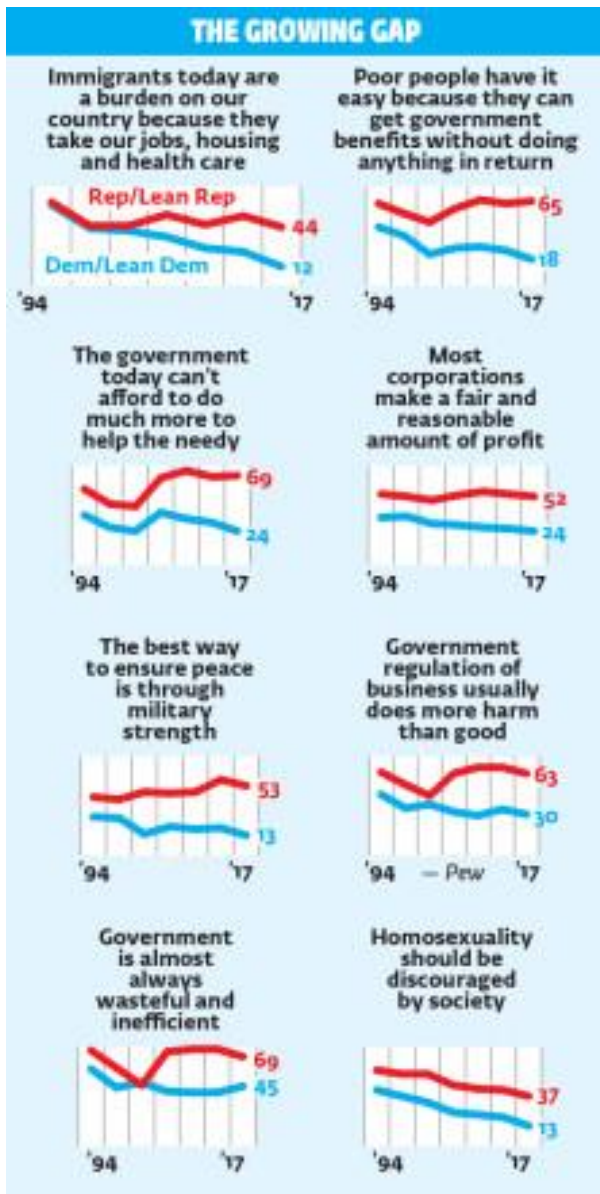
I spent many Sundays in evangelical churches and hung out with 15,000 evangelical youth at the Urbana conference. I wasn’t sure what to expect among thousands of college-age evangelicals, but I certainly didn’t expect the intense discussion of racial equity and refugee issues — how to help them, not how to keep them out — but that is what I got.



At Urbana, I met dozens of people who were dedicating their lives to the mission, spreading the good news of Jesus, of course, but doing so through a life of charity and compassion for others: staffing remote hospitals, building homes for the homeless and, in one case, flying a “powered parachute” over miles of uninhabited jungle in the western Congo to bring a little bit of

entertainment, education and relief to some of the remotest villages you could imagine. It was all inspiring — and a little foolhardy, if you ask me about the safety of a powered parachute — but it left me with a very different impression of a community that was previously known to me only through Jerry Falwell and the movie “Footloose.”

Early this year, I drove west from Houston to Gonzales, Texas, to try my hand at pig hunting. It was my first time with a gun, and the noticeably concerned owner of the ranch at first banished me to a solitary spot on the grounds. Here, he said, the pigs would come to me and I could not pose a danger to anyone else. It was a nice spot indeed but did not make for much of a story, so I wandered off into the woods, hopefully protected by my Day-Glo hunting vest.



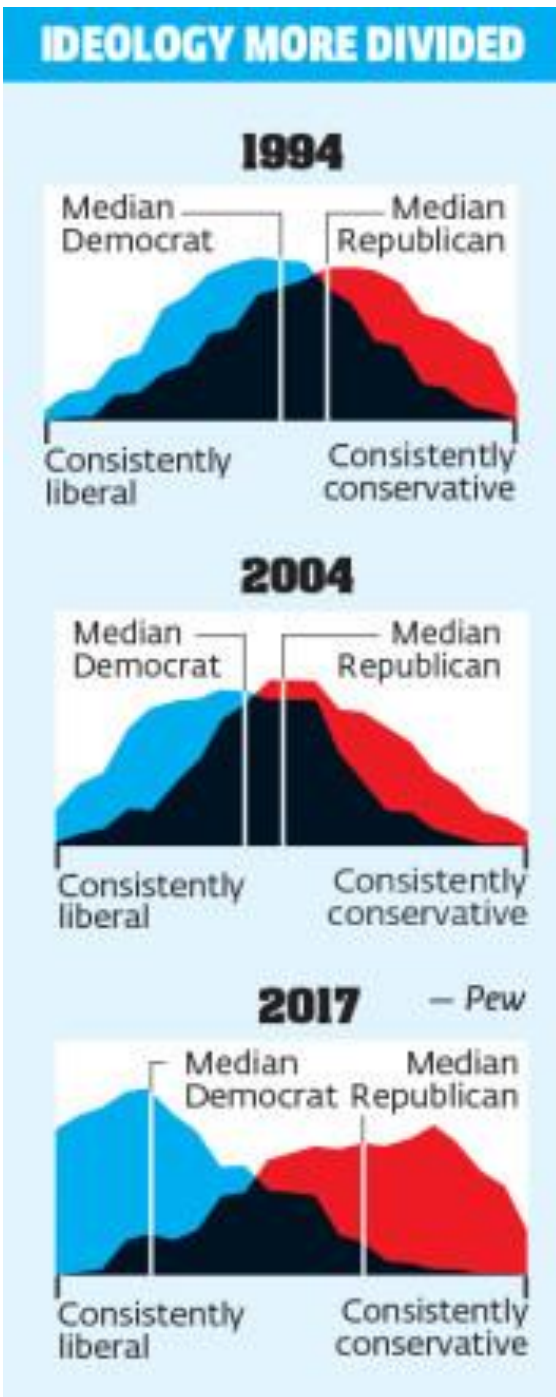
I eventually joined up with a family from Georgia. The group included the grandfather, Paps, and the father, CJ, but it was young Isaac, all of 8 years old, who took on the task of tutoring me in the ways of the hunt. He did a fine job, but we encountered few pigs (and killed none) in our morning walkabout. In the afternoon, with the Georgians heading home, I linked up with a group of friends from Houston who belied the demographic stereotyping of the hunt; collectively we were the equivalent of a bad bar joke: a Hispanic ex-soldier, a young black family man, a Serbian immigrant and a Jew from DC.

None of my new hunting partners fit the lazy caricature of the angry NRA member. Rather, they saw guns as both a shared sport and as a necessary means to protect their families during uncertain times. In truth, the only one who was even modestly angry was me, and that only had to do with my terrible ineptness as a hunter. In the end though, I did bag a pig, or at least my new friends were willing to award me a kill, so that we could all glory together in the fraternity of the hunt.

I also spent time in depressed areas of Kentucky and Ohio with workers who felt that their concerns had long fallen on deaf ears and were looking for every opportunity to protest a government and political and media establishment that had left them behind. I drank late into the night at the Royal Oaks Bar in Youngstown and met workers who had been out of the mills for almost two decades and had suffered the interlocking plagues of unemployment, opioid addiction and declining health. They mourned the passing of the old days, when factory jobs were plentiful, lucrative and honored and lamented the destruction and decay of their communities, their

livelihoods and their families. To a man (and sometimes a woman), they looked at media and saw stories that did not reflect the world that they knew or the fears that they had.

Over the course of this past year, I have tried to consume media as they do and understand it as a partisan player. It is not so hard to do. Take guns. Gun control and gun rights is one of our most divisive issues, and there are legitimate points on both sides. But media is obsessed with the gun-control side and gives only scant, mostly negative, recognition to the gun-rights sides.



Take for instance the issue of the legitimate defensive gun use (DGUs), which is often dismissed by the media as myth. But DGUs happen all the time — 200 times a day, according to the Department of Justice, or 5,000 times a day according to an overly exuberant Florida State University study. But whichever study you choose to believe, DGUs happen frequently and give credence to my hunting friends who see their guns as the last line of defense for themselves and their families.

At one point during my research, I discovered a video of a would-be robber entering a Houston smoke shop, his purpose conveyed by the pistol that he leveled at the store clerk. But the robber was not the only armed person in the store. The security cameras show Raleigh, the store clerk, walking out from behind the counter, calmly raising his own gun and firing an accurate stream of bullets at the hapless robber. The wounded robber stumbles out, falls over the curb and eventually ends up under arrest.

It is not just the defensive gun use that makes the video remarkable — it is Raleigh himself who evidences such a nonchalance that he never bothers to put down the cigarette that he is smoking. At the end, Raleigh, having protected his store, enthuses “Castle Doctrine, baby” — citing a law that allows a person to use force to defend a legally occupied place.

It is an amazing story, though far from unique, but you simply won't find many like it in mainstream media (I found it on Reddit).

It's not that media is suppressing stories intentionally. It's that these stories don't reflect their interests and beliefs.

It's why my new friends in Youngstown, Ohio, and Pikeville, Ky., see media as hopelessly disconnected from their lives, and it is how the media has opened the door to charges of bias.

The mainstream media is constantly under attack by the president. They are "frankly disgusting," "tremendously dishonest," "failing," "they make up the stories" and are now threatened with loss of broadcast licenses if they continue to author "fake news." And that is just a random Wednesday's worth of words from Donald Trump.

Some may take pleasure in the discomfort of the media, but it is not a good situation for the country to have the media in disrepute and under constant attack. Virtually every significant leader of this nation, from Jefferson on down, has recognized the critical role of an independent press to the orderly functioning of democracy. We should all be worried that more than 65 percent of voters think there is a lot of fake news in the mainstream media and that our major media institutions are seen as creating, not combatting, our growing partisan divide.

Some of this loss of reputation stems from effective demagoguery from the right and the left, as well as from our demagogue-in-chief, but the attacks wouldn't be so successful if our media institutions hadn't failed us as well.

None of this justifies the attacks from President Trump, which are terribly inappropriate coming from the head of government. At the same time, the media should acknowledge its own failings in reflecting only their part of America. You can't cover America from the Acela corridor, and the media need to get out and be part of the conversations that take place in churches and community centers and town halls.

I did that, and loved it, though I regret waiting until well after I left NPR to do so. I am skeptical that many will do so, since the current situation in an odd way works for Trump, who gets to rile his base, and for the media, which has grown an audience on the back of Washington dysfunction. In the end, they are both short-term winners. It is the public that is the long-term loser.