



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It was just past halftime on Super Bowl Sunday, and I was in bed reading.

(Hey, I'd made it through the first half – despite having no interest in football – and the entire halftime show, despite having no knowledge of “The Weeknd,” his music, why he spells his name like that, or what was up with those creepy, bandage-faced dancers. My wifely duty was done.)

My phone buzzed and it was a text from an old college friend, saying, “I just saw a Jeep commercial on TV and my eyes got watery and I thought, OMG, I hope Margaret just saw that.” Of course, I hadn't, so my friend texted me a link to the ad.

It was the now infamous Bruce Springsteen/Jeep spot entitled “The Middle.” Surely you've seen it by now: The Boss, decked out in scuffed boots and a cowboy hat, driving through middle America in a Jeep – reportedly his own – past iconic American scenery (a horse, a train, a diner, a flag, a chapel) while waxing poetic about “connection” and “common ground” and “crossing the divide” and such.

You regular readers know The Middle is practically my middle name – *these are my themes, man!* – and as such, I

was predictably moved to teary-eyed lump-throatedness. But even as I watched, dabbed and sniffled, I began to feel a mild sense of...

uh oh

. And before this beautiful, slightly corny two-minute tribute to “the ReUnited States of America” had run its course, I had come to suspect it would probably divide Americans.

And it did. But not in the usual way. Those of us who already crave The Middle – who long for a center that holds – mostly loved the ad, while devoted partisans on both the right *and* the left mostly hated it.

I was tempted to call that progress – the right and the left sharing a common hatred is a kind of unity, right? – but then I started reading their reasons why. (Because, of course, it was already all over the Internet the next morning.)

Speaking for the left, Chris Richards at the *Washington Post* wrote, "Despite the healing sound of his voice, Springsteen is ultimately preaching reconciliation without reckoning — which after January's Capitol siege is no longer an acceptable path toward progress. Plus, this is Bruce Springsteen. Isn't he the guy who's supposed to know everything about hard work? Suggesting that we should all swiftly and metaphorically travel to the nucleus of White, rural America to make up and move along feels insulting and wrong."

Meanwhile, from the right, Dan McLaughlin at *National Review* wrote, "Bruce is well-known as a Democratic partisan. He hit the campaign trail for John Kerry, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden. He performed for Biden's inauguration. For a celebrity so identified with one party to go to the other side's turf

after his side has won the election

and call for unity is not really an effective tactic. People see it for what it is: We won, now get together

behind us

. I don't doubt that Bruce is disturbed by where the descent into mad tribalism has taken us in the past twelve months — who isn't? — but you can spend your credibility on partisanship, or you can spend it on unity. Either is an honorable choice. But nobody can do both."

This was some of the kinder, gentler commentary I read. On Facebook, things were a bit more heated. A conservative FB friend commented on the ad: "This is the overwhelming majority of thinking on the Left: Now that we've lied, cheated, bullied, browbeaten, bludgeoned, rioted, burned and looted our way into power, can't we all just get along?"

I pointed him to the *Washington Post* column above, reminding him that "the *left* thinks it's the *right*

who 'lied, cheated, bullied, bludgeoned, rioted,' etc. and they're no more ready to kiss and make up than you are. So what now?"

While pondering our festering estrangement – ‘cause I’m not feeling that much-hyped unity yet, are y’all? – I found a fortuitous delivery in my email inbox: another article from journalist Matt Taibbi, who left *Rolling Stone* several months ago to write independently for subscribers. Taibbi’s ongoing critique of our corporate news media has convinced me of their significant complicity in our national nightmare of division.

In his book *Hate, Inc.*, published in late 2019, Taibbi describes a 21st century media industry that has mastered the art of monetizing anger, paranoia, and distrust, offering up “news” that is really more like entertainment for its respective polarized audiences. The essay in my inbox was a new chapter – for the paperback edition of

Hate, Inc.

– that traces the apotheosis of this phenomenon during the Trump era, describing something Taibbi calls “Ponzi journalism.” It’s a technique by which networks keep ratings high by moving from one mania to another, using each new bombshell story to push the last one down the memory hole, especially if it’s factually incorrect. Which is all too often the case.

Speaking of the past few years, Taibbi writes, “Audiences devoured bombshells even when aware on a subconscious level that they might not hold up to scrutiny. If a story turned out to be incorrect, that was okay. News was now more about underlying narratives audiences felt were true and important. For conservatives, Trump was saving America from a conspiracy of elites. For liberal audiences, Trump was trying to assume dictatorial power, and the defenders of democracy were trying to stop him.

“A symbiosis developed. Where audiences once punished media companies for mistakes, now they rewarded them for serving up the pure heroin of shaky, first-draft-like blockbusters. They wanted to be in the trenches of information discovery. Audiences were choosing powerful highs over lasting ones.”

And that’s where we media consumers – aka Americans – are now. Taibbi provides example after example of popular narratives that might as well be “gospel truth” with one side or the other, despite having been decisively proven false. We are still – maybe more than ever – choosing powerful highs over lasting ones, and we’re doing so at the expense of truth and a common reality.

Will things get better now that Trump is out of office? I was hopeful a few weeks ago. Now? Not so much.

Consider this recent headline in the *New York Times*: “You Can Barely Tell It’s the Same Trial in Cable Impeachment Coverage: Descriptions like ‘very powerful’ and ‘really stellar’ on MSNBC and CNN. And ‘asinine’ and ‘irrational’ on Fox News.”

I fear it’s going to take a lot more than a new president and a sentimental Super Bowl commercial to bring Americans back together into some semblance of a shared reality. Incidentally, that Jeep spot has already been pulled after news broke last week that Springsteen got a DUI back in November.

In a country I barely recognize anymore, where news anchors entertain us and pop icons lecture us on morality, it’s strangely heartwarming to know rock stars still occasionally run afoul of the law.

Now *that’s* the America I know and love.

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