

IDEAS


# THE WEAPONIZATION OF LONELINESS


To defend America against those who would exploit our social disconnection,  
we need to rebuild our communities.


By Hillary Rodham Clinton



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**T**HE QUESTION that preoccupied me and many others over much of the past eight years is how our democracy became so susceptible to a would-be strongman and demagogue. The question that keeps me up at night now—with increasing urgency as 2024 approaches—is whether we have done enough to rebuild our defenses or whether our democracy is still highly vulnerable to attack and subversion.

There's reason for concern: the influence of dark money and corporate power, right-wing propaganda and misinformation, malign foreign interference in our elections, and the vociferous backlash against social progress. The “vast right-wing conspiracy” has been of compelling interest to me for many years. But I've long thought something important was missing from our national conversation about threats to our democracy. Now recent findings from a perhaps unexpected source—America's top doctor—offer a new perspective on our problems and valuable insights into how we can begin healing our ailing nation.

[Arthur C. Brooks: How we learned to be lonely](#)

In May, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy published an advisory, warning that a growing “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” threatens Americans' personal health and also the health of our democracy. Murthy reported that, even before COVID, about half of all American adults were experiencing substantial levels of loneliness. Over the past two decades, Americans have spent significantly more time alone, engaging less with family, friends, and people outside the home. By 2018, just 16 percent of Americans said they felt very attached to their local community.

An “epidemic of loneliness” may sound abstract at a time when our democracy faces concrete and imminent threats, but the surgeon general’s report helps explain how we became so vulnerable. In the past, surgeons general have at crucial moments sounded the alarm about major crises and drawn our attention to underappreciated threats, including smoking, HIV/AIDS, and obesity. This is one of those moments.

The rate of young adults who report suffering from loneliness went up every single year from 1976 to 2019. From 2003 to 2020, the average time that young people spent in person with friends declined by nearly 70 percent. Then the pandemic turbocharged our isolation.

According to the surgeon general, when people are disconnected from friends, family, and communities, their lifetime risk of heart disease, dementia, depression, and stroke skyrockets. Shockingly, prolonged loneliness is as bad, or worse, for our health as being obese or smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Researchers also say that loneliness can generate anger, resentment, and even paranoia. It diminishes civic engagement and social cohesion, and increases political polarization and animosity. Unless we address this crisis, Murthy warned, “we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country.”

**I**N 1996, I published *It Takes a Village*. As first lady, I was worried that American life had become frantic and fragmented for many people, especially stressed-out parents. Social, economic, and technological trends seemed to be pulling us apart rather than lifting us up. We were spending more time in our cars and in front of the television and less time engaging in our communities. Even back then, before smartphones and social media, it was evident that Americans were becoming more isolated, lonely, and unmoored from traditional sources of meaning and support—and that our kids were suffering because of this. I also was concerned about the rise of right-wing politicians like Newt Gingrich and media personalities like Rush Limbaugh who were sowing division and alienation.

Nearly 30 years later, it’s clear that the problems I diagnosed in the 1990s ran deeper than I realized, and were more

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dire than I could have imagined. But the prescriptions in *It Takes a Village*—putting families first, investing in community infrastructure, protecting kids from out-of-control technology, and recommitting to the core American values of mutual responsibility and empathy—have only grown more urgent and necessary.

The surgeon general’s warning echoes the findings of other researchers who have studied these trends for decades. In his influential 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam showed that Americans’ social ties and support networks collapsed in the second half of the 20th century. Many of the activities and relationships that had defined and sustained previous generations, such as attending religious services and joining unions, clubs, and civic organizations—even participating in local bowling leagues—were disappearing. Putnam’s more recent work shows that these trends have only gotten worse in the early decades of the 21st century, and that they go hand in hand with intensifying political polarization, economic inequality, loss of trust in government, and a shift in the national attitude from “we’re all in this together” to “you’re on your own.”

Murthy cites the work of another Harvard researcher, Raj Chetty, who shows how the decline of social connections between people of different classes and backgrounds—the kinds of relationships that used to be formed in VFW halls, church basements, and PTA meetings—has significantly reduced economic mobility in America. The data show that diverse, robust social networks make the American dream possible. Without them, it fades.



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Twins, Separated at Birth, Reunite as Adults



EMILY BUDER

All of this aligns with the findings of the Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton. They attribute soaring rates of what they call “deaths of despair”—including suicides and deaths from alcohol and drug overdoses—to a toxic mix of economic stagnation, declining social ties, rising alienation, and families and communities coming apart.

The surgeon general points, as well, to the crucial role of technology. He highlights data showing that Americans who use social media for more than two hours a day are twice as likely to experience loneliness and feelings of social isolation as people who used social media for less than 30 minutes a day. As we spend more time online, we spend less time interacting with one another in person or engaging with our local communities. The more we live in social-media echo chambers, the less we trust one another, and the more we struggle to find common ground with or feel empathy for people who have different perspectives and experiences.

Murthy followed his report on loneliness with a second advisory just 20 days later, warning that heavy social-media use among teenagers is driving a dangerous increase in depression and other mental-health challenges. From 2001 to 2021, the suicide rate among people in their early 20s surged by more than 60 percent. For 10-to-14-year-olds, it tripled. These are numbers that should shake us to our core.

My three grandchildren are too young to experience the worst of this. Still, I can't help but think about where they and their friends and classmates will be soon, exposed hour after hour to whatever content some hidden algorithm decides to promote. I worry about American children's self-esteem, their mental health, their sense of perspective and reality.

The way Americans—and young people in particular—interact with technology today, the way our phones and social-media networks inject bullying, abuse, misinformation, outrage, and anger directly into our brains, is not something any of us could have foreseen just a few short decades ago. When I wrote *It Takes a Village*, I was concerned about the effects on young people of violence on TV. Now, in the age of social media, those worries almost seem quaint.

**W**HAT DOES ALL of this loneliness and disconnection mean for our democracy?

Murthy carefully connects the dots between increasing social isolation and declining civic engagement. “When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone,” he wrote in *The New York Times*.

Hillary Rodham Clinton and Dan Schwerin: A state of emergency for democracy

It’s not just the surgeon general who recognizes that social isolation saps the lifeblood of democracy. So do the ultra-right-wing billionaires, propagandists, and provocateurs who see authoritarianism as a source of power and profit.

There have always been angry young men alienated from mainstream society and susceptible to the appeal of demagogues and hate-mongers. But modern technology has taken the danger to another level. This was Steve Bannon’s key insight.

Long before Bannon ran Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, he was involved in the world of online gaming. He discovered an army of what he later described as “rootless white males,” disconnected from the real world but highly engaged online and often quick to resort to sexist and racist attacks. When Bannon took over the hard-right website *Breitbart News*, he was determined to turn these socially isolated gamers into the shock troops of the alt-right, pumping them full of conspiracy theories and hate speech. Bannon pursued the same project as a senior executive at Cambridge Analytica, the notorious data-mining and online-influence company largely owned by the right-wing billionaire Robert Mercer. According to a former Cambridge Analytica engineer turned whistleblower, Bannon targeted “incels,” or involuntarily celibate men, because they were easy to manipulate and prone to believing conspiracy theories. “You can activate that army,” Bannon told the *Bloomberg* journalist Joshua Green. “They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump.”

Like many others, I was too slow to see the impact this strategy could have. Now the surgeon general is telling us that social disconnection is not just a problem at the margins—not just the usual “angry young men”—but is in fact an epidemic sweeping the country.

I have seen firsthand how dangerous lies can fuel violence and undermine our democratic process. During the 2016 campaign, a shocking number of people became convinced that I am a murderer, a terrorist sympathizer, and the evil mastermind behind a child-sex-abuse ring. Alex Jones, the right-wing talk-show host, posted a video about “all the children Hillary Clinton has personally murdered and chopped up and raped.”

This was not the first time that I was the subject of wild conspiracy theories or partisan rage that veered into mania. In the 1990s, supermarket tabloids used to splash headlines such as “Hillary Clinton Adopts Alien Baby” across their front pages. I was even burned in effigy by a crowd in Kentucky furious that I had proposed taxing cigarettes to help fund universal health care for all Americans. The president of the Kentucky Association of Tobacco Supporters chanted, “Burn, baby, burn” as he poured gasoline on a scarecrow in a dress labeled I’M HILLARY. By 2016, I fully expected to play a starring role in the fever dreams of extremists at the margins of American politics.

But something had changed. Social media gave conspiracy theories far wider reach than ever before. Fox News and other right-wing media outlets gave outlandish lies “credibility.” And before Trump, we’d never had a presidential candidate—and then an actual president—who used the biggest bully pulpit in the world to be an actual bully and traffic in this kind of trash. The results were tragic but predictable. In early December 2016, a 28-year-old man from North Carolina armed with a Colt AR-15 assault rifle shot up a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., because he had read online that it was the headquarters of my supposed child-sex ring. Thankfully, no one was harmed. But the pizzeria attack foreshadowed the violence to come: QAnon followers and militia members storming the Capitol on January 6, 2021; mass shooters leaving



behind manifestos riddled with misogyny, racism, anti-Semitism, and other conspiracy theories promoted in far-right echo chambers.

As we look ahead to 2024, the threat to our democracy is not just from more of this kind of violence—although I fear that is coming as well. Many Americans breathed a sigh of relief after last year’s midterms because prominent election deniers and conspiracy theorists were defeated, including Kari Lake in Arizona and Doug Mastriano in Pennsylvania. But these statewide victories obscured more troubling developments at the local level.

Consider Peggy Judd, a middle-aged white woman from Cochise County, Arizona, who participated in the January 6 “Stop the Steal” rally and reportedly promotes Trump’s Big Lie about the 2020 election and QAnon conspiracy theories. Judd is not just some Facebook gadfly. She is an elected member of the Cochise County Board of Supervisors. And in 2022, she refused to certify the results of the midterm elections until she was finally compelled to do so by a judge.

A recent study from the organization Informing Democracy identified more than 200 local officials across six battleground states who, like Judd, have taken antidemocratic actions. Many of them are in a position to administer or influence the 2024 elections. They’re county clerks and municipal election commissioners, state legislators and members of canvassing boards. They’re people you’ve probably never heard of who play vital roles in making our electoral system work.

A hallmark of American democracy is that elections have been largely run by local, usually nonpartisan volunteers and officials. Communities generally trusted these election administrators because they knew them—they saw them in the supermarket, at restaurants, at their kids’ schools. This patchwork system has always been vulnerable to localized corruption and racial discrimination, but most folks who raised their hands to help out did so with good intentions and good results.

Not anymore. As the trust and social ties that used to bind communities together have frayed, apathy, isolation, and polarization have undercut the old “we’re all in this together” ethos. Instead of nonpartisan volunteers and civic organizations like the

League of Women Voters, we have MAGA election deniers and QAnon enthusiasts. There's now a widespread shortage of poll workers because so many have faced harassment and abuse, just for doing their jobs and helping people vote.

In Fulton County, Georgia, the election worker Shaye Moss and her mother, Ruby Freeman, who helped out in 2020 as a temp, faced racist death threats after Trump falsely accused them of orchestrating massive fraud. "I just felt bad for my mom," Moss later told the January 6 congressional committee, "and I felt horrible for picking this job and being the one that always wants to help and always [be] there, never missing not one election."

David A. Graham: A guide to the possible forthcoming indictments of Donald Trump

American democracy needs people like Shaye Moss and Ruby Freeman to keep raising their hands and offering to help. This country was built by men and women who believed in service, community, and working together for the greater good—pioneers who stuck together in wagon trains, farmers who pitched in on barn raisings and quilting bees, immigrants who joined volunteer fire departments, enslaved people who risked their lives to serve on the Underground Railroad and help others escape to freedom. Murthy and Putnam might call these ties social capital. In the 1830s, the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville visited America and wrote about our "habits of the heart." However we describe it, the sense that "we're all in it together" made our democratic experiment possible—and it may be the only thing that can save us still.

Without a doubt, winning elections at every level is essential. We need to defeat the demagogues and election deniers so convincingly that there's no room for dirty tricks. And it's heartening that organizations like Run for Something are mobilizing candidates for school boards, county clerkships, and state legislatures across the country. We also need to strengthen voting rights and fight back against misinformation. But ultimately, winning the next election is never going to be enough. We must work together to restitch our unraveling social fabric, and to rebuild Americans' trust in one another, our democracy, and our shared future.

Although there is an important debate to be had about how much economic conditions contribute to loneliness and alienation, the significant investments being made under President Joe Biden can lift both incomes and aspirations. The historic legislation enacted by Biden and the Democrats in Congress will modernize infrastructure, bring supply chains home, and boost manufacturing in key industries such as semiconductors and electric vehicles. These investments may help stem the outflow of workers and young people forced to leave their communities to seek opportunity far from home, leaving behind friends, families, and emotional and spiritual support systems. Too often, when Americans face boarded-up storefronts, empty pews, and crumbling schools, it's despair, loneliness, and resentment that fill the void. Bringing opportunity back to these hard-hit places and enabling more Americans to stay and raise families where their roots are won't reverse the toxic impacts of social media, disrupt the right-wing media machine, or end our political polarization, but it's a step in the right direction. We can build on that by raising taxes on the wealthiest individuals and corporations to buttress our social safety net and invest in schools and communities.

In his advisory, Murthy offers other recommendations for rebuilding social connection and cohesion. They include pro-family policies such as paid leave, and investments in public transit and community infrastructure that help people connect with one another in real life, not just online. He has also called for stronger and more sophisticated oversight and regulation of tech companies. In particular, there is an urgent need for more protections for kids on social media. And Murthy rightly argues that we can all do more in our own lives to nurture relationships with friends, family members, and neighbors, and seek out opportunities to serve and support others.

I offered similar prescriptions in *It Takes a Village*, arguing that we need to work together to help families raise healthy, successful children. Some of the work I envisioned would happen at home, such as families turning off screens and spending more time together. Much of it would be in communities, with local businesses, schools, congregations, and unions doing more to bring us together and help parents who often feel alone and overburdened. I thought government could help support that community engagement. For example, I was a big supporter of a Clinton-

administration program that gave poor families in public housing vouchers to move to safer, middle-income neighborhoods where their children could make friends and find mentors from different backgrounds. I was convinced that we had to come together as a national village and decide that helping all our kids live up to their God-given potential is more important than profits or partisanship.

These basic principles still ring true, and the evidence continues to show that this approach works. The children of those families that we helped move to better neighborhoods in the 1990s have grown up to attend college at higher rates, earn higher incomes, and have more stable families of their own than their peers who stayed behind. And the younger the kids were when they moved, the bigger boost they received.

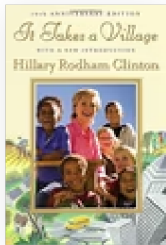
In recent years, I've often thought back to *It Takes a Village*. The pandemic should have been a case study in how Americans come together in the face of a common challenge. And at the beginning, there was a sense of solidarity and shared sacrifice. People realized that if their neighbor got sick, it could harm them too, and that the virus was striking everyone. The entire village was at risk. We really were all in it together. Tragically, this spirit quickly faded. President Trump and other right-wing leaders politicized the pandemic and turned public health into a wedge issue—a staggeringly shortsighted and dangerous move with predictably deadly results. And when data first emerged showing that COVID-19 was disproportionately affecting Black and Latino communities, support for safety precautions and shared sacrifice dropped among white people and conservatives. Instead of a story of our common humanity, the pandemic became a story of our fractured society and poisoned politics.

I haven't given up, though. I still believe in the wisdom and power of the American village. I'm inspired by the moms and dads showing up at school-board meetings and getting involved in local politics for the first time because they refuse to let extremists ban books from the neighborhood library. I love reading about teenagers turning to old-school flip phones so they're no longer at the mercy of giant tech firms and hidden algorithms. I'm encouraged by the growing number of companies giving employees time off to vote and recognizing that they have responsibilities not just to

shareholders but also to workers, customers, communities, and the planet. And I take heart from the workers bravely organizing corporate warehouses and coffee shops, or walking a picket line, breathing new life into the labor movement and insisting that even in our fractured age, we are still stronger together.

If you dig deep enough, through all the mud of politics and polarization, eventually you hit something hard and true: a foundation of values and aspirations that bind us together as Americans. That's something to build on. If we can break out of our toxic "us versus them" dichotomies, if we can shrink our notion of "the other" and expand the "we" in "we the people," perhaps we can discover that we have more in common than we think.

Though we are divided in so many ways, though we are lonelier and more isolated than ever, it remains true that none of us can raise a family, build a business, strengthen a community, or heal a nation alone. We have to do it together. It still takes a village.



## **It Takes A Village**

By Hillary Rodham Clinton

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