

Transcript of Masthead conference call with Adam Serwer, December 11, 2017

Matt Peterson: Hi everyone, I'm Matt Peterson from the The Masthead. Welcome to our regular series of conference calls with Atlantic writers and editors. Today we're talking to Adam Serwer. Adam is a senior editor at The Atlantic covering politics. He wrote a story called *The Nationalist's Delusion*, which is about how Donald Trump appealed to race and identity even while letting his supporters deny that they were racist or that this was happening. Adam, thank you for joining us.

Adam Serwer: Thank you for having me.

Matt Peterson: Before we get into it, let me just quickly remind everybody how these calls work. We want to take your questions on this call, and I've collected quite a few that people sent in in advance. We'd love to take your questions in real time here, too. To do that, you can go to social.maestroconference.com. That's social.maestroconference.com, and login and then look for the little chat window and look for the everybody tab. If you type your questions in there, we will find them and I can pass them onto Adam. You can also email them to us at themasthead@theatlantic.com.

All right, let's get started here. Adam, as you wrote in the little annotation for us at The Masthead, you had been thinking about this story for a long time. What was the story that you felt you needed to tell with this piece?

Adam Serwer: I think for me, the story that I felt like I needed to tell was about this cognitive dissonance between people wanting to think of themselves as anti-racist or as not racist, and nevertheless supporting policies that discriminate on the basis of race or religion. I think that for a lot of people of color in the United States, that cognitive dissonance is a thing that they're very familiar with and they see it every day.

I think for a lot of the American press, which is overwhelmingly white, that phenomenon is extremely difficult to document or to explain. Part of what I wanted to do was just show how this thing works and how it's been a part of our politics for a very long time, and specifically, how it worked in the forces that propelled Donald Trump's victory, which I think in part due to this cognitive dissonance, were not covered as accurately as they should have been.

Matt Peterson: I'm curious what your experience has been in talking about racism in public. I've gotten a lot of notes from lots of different types of people about this. Both sides tend to object to this framing, or you get objections from both sides. You have supporters of the president who are not racist or say they aren't and they object to being painted with a broad brush, and then on the other side, you have folks who are opponents of the president who think that talking about racism shuts down the conversation. How do you think about this in a piece like this?

Adam Serwer: Well, that was a big focus of the piece. The cultural pressure against talking about racism in the way that I wrote about it here is very strong because chances are, you have Trump supporters in your family. You don't want to think of them that way. If you're in the press, you don't want to alienate your viewers or your listeners or your readers or your subscribers.

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That's really just a function of the ongoing political power of white people in America who have a collective interest that they don't necessarily recognize in downplaying how much of a powerful force racism is in American politics. It's one thing when people deny it, which is something that I'm writing about, but the other thing is that there's a weird political correctness where you're not supposed to say it because it might alienate people.

My job as a journalist isn't to sugarcoat the truth in the most politically palatable or useful way. It's to tell the truth as I see it. I think that I'm pretty clear in the story that this is not a very useful political narrative. It's not something that talking about it is going to help the Democratic party to win votes or anything like that. I do think it's important to establish what actually happened, and that was what I was hoping to do with the story.

Matt Peterson: Yes. I want to read a member comment that speaks to those themes. A reader named David wrote to me, "I don't disagree with Serwer's analysis on the whole, but the problem is that analysis conflicts with advocacy. It really doesn't help to say Trump is the first white president or whatever, if you want to bring these people to their senses," and that is of course referencing Ta-Nehisi Coates' piece for us that touched on similar themes. It's obviously not our job to do advocacy, as you said, but we do have to make sure that these pieces have an impact. Do you worry about people putting their fingers in their ears when they hear this stuff?

Adam Serwer: Well, part of the reason why I interviewed so many Trump supporters was I wanted to illustrate how they see themselves. I didn't just want it to be my thoughts, just me ranting. I tried as best I could to do the piece in a dispassionate way that didn't feel like a rant or didn't feel angry or didn't feel emotional, in part because I wanted people to take the argument seriously, even if it made them mad or even if they disagreed with me or even if it made them uncomfortable. That's the best way I know how to do it.

Matt Peterson: Yes. There's a theme in the responses that I've seen to this about political persuasion, and I wanted to ask you about this, because this is what Hillary Clinton was getting at, too, with this idea of irredeemable opponents to her policies, or irredeemable supporters of the president. Is it sensible in 2017 to talk about persuading the other side? Is that actually a thing that we can do in our politics?

Adam Serwer: Well, I don't know. I'm not a political strategist. I can't speak to what the best way is to win people over, but I will say that people sometimes vote because of racism, but even people who are racist can cast their votes for other reasons and have other motivating factors.

One interesting thing about the Obama to Trump voters was that those voters, as I noted in the piece, they had negative perceptions of black people but they voted for Obama in part I think because he was very successful at painting himself as an exception to the rule, which a lot of people retained their prejudices and still cast a vote for him because they thought him as different from everyone else.

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Just because a racist appeal persuades a person at a given time, it doesn't mean that's always the reason that they're going to vote that way. I think as far as persuasion goes, I'm sure that there are things that can convince at least a number of these voters to vote the other direction the next time. I just wouldn't begin to know what that might be.

Matt Peterson: Right. As part of the piece, you mentioned this political history that we have in this country where this comes in and out of our politics. Did you get any sense from looking back at the history of why this type of politics comes and goes, the denial of the racist motivations, is it a cycle that we're doomed to keep repeating, I guess is what I'm trying to ask?

Adam Serwer: I think it sort of is a cycle that we're doomed to keep repeating, at least for a while. It's the most salient dividing line in our politics and it has been since the country was created. I think there are different reasons it pops up at different times.

I think war has a lot to do with it. We've been at war in Afghanistan and Iraq for years, even though the war in Iraq is supposed to be over. A country at war has a national identity that's shaped by conflict and that can spur a kind of unity, but it can also spur liberal tendencies that see people who are different or people who have different ideas as threats to their way of life. I think probably perhaps the single biggest factor aside from Obama's election is probably the ongoing global war on terror.

Matt Peterson: You think that the fact that there's this ongoing war forces people into identity politics? Is that what you're saying?

Adam Serwer: No. What I'm saying is that I think it shapes people's political perceptions about what's acceptable. What you're going to think is okay is going to be different based on whether you're in an emergency or not, and we've essentially been in a state of emergency, mentally speaking, our politics has been a state of emergency for more than a decade now.

I think that, and Obama's election, which came at the crest of a wave of the political power of religious and ethnic minorities, I think radicalized a lot of people who were already feeling scared or feeling their status threatened. It had a lot to do with their perceiving their problems, whether economic or social, as the result of these outside forces that were changing the country as they felt like they knew it.

Matt Peterson: We're getting a couple of questions in our live chat about cognitive dissonance. Let me bring in a couple of members here. Janna is asking, "Is there a higher level of cognitive dissonance than before, or are we just more accepting because of the overwhelming media messages that confuse us about our own beliefs?"

Adam Serwer: Well, I don't think there's a higher level. I think that, again, this is because our country is founded on this contradiction, everyone's created equal but also we own slaves and they count for three fifths of a person, I think the cognitive

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dissonance is necessitated by that founding contradiction. Until it's completely reconciled, it's going to be a permanent part of our politics.

Matt Peterson: Is social media a factor here? This is a question from Sanford. He's asking, "Has cognitive dissonance trickled up to our representatives in the legislative branch fueled by the president's tweets?"

Adam Serwer: Well, I think that social media is actually not to blame. I think largely to blame is cable news, in particular, Fox News. A much smaller percentage of people are active on say, political Twitter, than a lot of people who are really into politics recognize. I really think that Trump's election in particular is shaped and continues to be shaped by Fox News and by its perception of the world, which largely reflects the siege mentality of its viewers, which is that there are all these people who are very different who are threatening them.

There are undocumented immigrants trying to take their jobs. There are black criminals who are trying to vote illegally or who are playing the knockout game. There are scary Muslims who are going to invade their cities and make everybody adhere to Taliban-style Sharia law. I think that worldview is reflected in Donald Trump's speech and is reflected in his general approach to politics, which to this day continues to be shaped by what he views on Fox News when he watches eight hours of television a day.

Matt Peterson: I want to go to this family of articles that yours is included in, a canon about understanding Trump's election. We've got a member named Coby who wrote to me right after we sent the annotation out and wrote, "It's amazing to me that more than a year after his election, we don't really have a true feel for what caused Trump's victory." He said he doesn't feel much closer to the unified field theory of Trumpism than he was 10 months ago. Why is it so hard to understand why Trump won this election?

Adam Serwer: Well, the argument that I make is that it's not so much that it's hard to understand, but that we don't actually want to understand it because what it says about the country and about ourselves. That was a big part of the piece. It's not just Trump supporters who are in denial about this. It's in fact their liberal, very anti-Trump relatives and friends.

People don't really want to accept the extent to which this thing is continuing to shape our politics, because we tell ourselves a very triumphant story of how there was racism, but then Martin Luther King happened and then the Civil Rights Act, and then racism is over, and then Barack Obama. There's no riding off into the sunset.

Matt Peterson: Let me put it this way. For voters here who have trouble understanding and parsing this, what happened in 2016, what do you say to them when people come and ask you, "I feel confused"? How do you explain away that lingering sense that we'll just never get it?

Adam Serwer: Well, I think obviously elections are complicated, and one of the things I said in the piece was that I think that racism is not the only factor in Trump's election,

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but it is an indispensable factor. The truth is that there are so many things to write about. There are so many different perspectives to write from, that there may never be an exhaustive monocausal explanation for Trump's election, but the world is complicated. Not everything has a clean, safe answer, but I do think that this piece outlines one of the indispensable factors that Trump could simply not have won without.

Matt Peterson: Some members also asked us about you saw this in relation to Ta-Nehisi Coates' piece, *The First White President*, which was within a similar vein as yours, at least. What did you think about that piece as you wrote yours?

Adam Serwer: Ta-Nehisi and I were writing at the same time, because I started writing my piece in October, and we came to similar conclusions, but we actually came there from different places. I think his piece is obviously very incredibly well-written. He's maybe the best writer in English.

Actually, my piece was more or less finished, or in a close to completed place before I read his, and I did that in part because I didn't want to have my own reasoning influenced by my colleague's conclusions. I think the fact that we saw something similar is in part because a lot of people of color saw something similar in what happened. Like I said, this kind of cognitive dissonance is something that we encounter in our daily lives.

What happened with Trump was this phenomenon on a mass scale. I think part of the reason that that perspective wasn't reflected in the coverage itself was that the media in general, political reporting, is overwhelmingly white and also tries to avoid editorializing, and so that perspective was not necessarily one that could've made it past the general noise of political coverage in 2016.

Matt Peterson: Let me ask you about the nature of this thing that we're talking about. I'll bring in a member's question from Reid here, who asks, "Is fear and anxiety about social change essentially the same as racism, or is it something distinct but not necessarily always separate?"

Adam Serwer: One of the things that I tried to do with this piece was that I didn't focus a whole lot on Trump's outrageous remarks. I tried to focus on policy, because when you're talking about racism, I think it's really important to focus not just on outrageous comments, which I think can mislead people about what the nature of racism is.

Racism is about political and social and cultural power. It's not necessarily about rudeness, and when you reduce it to rudeness or name calling or something like that, then you're missing the enormity of the phenomenon.

I don't know that social anxiety is the same thing as racism, but I do know that if your social anxiety leads you to believe that you should ban every member of a particular religion from the country, then that's still a racist policy regardless of how you got here.

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Matt Peterson: What do you as a professional political observer, as a journalist who covers politics, what do you look for as you're trying to diagnose racism in politics? It sounds like what you're suggesting is focus on policy outcomes, rather than tweets.

Adam Serwer: Well, not just policy outcomes, but policy proposals, policy intentions. I think it's very easy to find outrageous remarks made by Trump. In particular, Trump supporters would say, "Oh, he's not just polished. He's not a politician. He didn't mean it. I really think he cares about everybody." It's very easy for someone like Trump to not only say, "We should ban all Muslims," and also as I quoted in the piece, "I'm the least racist person you've ever met."

Focusing on policy gets us out of that realm of words or whether or not someone is simply bad at talking or not polished or not a politician, or just made a verbal mistake, and gets into the realm of how do these attitudes actually affect people in the real world.

Matt Peterson: You're suggesting a little bit the answer to the question that I want to ask here from Patrice here, who asked, "How can the media address the partisan divide?" Let me put it another way. How do you as a journalist contribute to a debate about policies rather than language at a time when everyone is in fact very concerned about language and focused on it, whether or not we should be?

Adam Serwer: Well, I think that's what I try to do in the piece, right? I didn't go into the stuff about him calling Alphonso Curiel, the judge in this case, a Mexican judge, because I wanted to focus on the fact that immigrations and customs enforcement is showing up at churches and schools to deport people who haven't committed any crimes at all after Trump said, "We're going to be going after the bad hombres."

Now, everybody knew what that meant. The ICE agents who endorsed him in his campaign knew what he meant by that. They knew that he wasn't just talking about criminals. I think the way that you talk about policy is you talk about policy. That way, you can get it out of the realm of this naughty words idea of racism, which I think can mislead people about like I said, the enormity of what we're talking about.

Matt Peterson: We've gotten a couple of questions from members about the special election in Alabama, where Roy Moore may win tomorrow or may not. We'll find out. Don asks, "What will the special election in Alabama tomorrow tell us about your broader thesis?"

Adam Serwer: I don't know that it necessarily says anything about the broader thesis. Look, the fact that Roy Moore is still a viable candidate in Alabama and may very well win despite the fact that he said Muslims shouldn't serve in Congress, he thinks homosexuality should be criminalized, he's connected to neo-Confederate groups, he's given himself money from his own charity. He is the most Trumpy of Trumpy candidates that we've seen win a Republican nomination this year. The fact that it's very possible that he comes away from tomorrow a US senator just tells you about the strength of the forces that I'm describing.

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Also, he's a birther. He's run a campaign almost entirely on these cultural grievances, rather than policy questions, in part because he recognizes that that's why people like him. That's why he built a reputation in Alabama. It's why he beat Luther Strange, and it's why he thinks he's going to win tomorrow. He very well might be right.

Matt Peterson: Do you have expectations for how these forces will play out more generally in the electorate? Trump of course has not delivered on all of the policy promises he made during the campaign. He's continued his focus on the racially divisive strategies that you've written about, and his popularity has shrunk. Do you see other politicians, whether or not they're Roy Moore or anyone else, does this look like an effective popular strategy that's likely to bring it to the fore in 2018 and then beyond?

Adam Serwer: I think that political gravity does still exist. I think that it's very possible that even though, as I say in the piece, his hardest core of supporters are never going to abandon him. Nixon had people protesting on his behalf right up until he resigned. There are people who may have cast a more or less reluctant vote for Trump, or who cast a vote for Trump hoping he would do one thing only to watch him do another, who maybe sit out the election next time or feel less strongly about campaigning or working for him. I don't know. That's possible. I just know that whatever happens, we're going to be wrestling with this thing for the foreseeable future because it's been a part of us from the beginning.

Matt Peterson: I want to go back in time actually. One of the things I liked the most about your piece was that you went far through history, particularly back to the Civil War, and you referenced Alexander Stephens, the confederate vice president who exhibited the same kind of hatred of press that we see from Trump, or at least in the one comment that you quoted.

The question, though, is about Stephens was defeated when the United States went to war against the secessionist states. How does this kind of phenomenon come to a head without violence? How pessimistic are you about our politics given that you went back to this period in history when actual violence broke out?

Adam Serwer: I think that violence is more politically illegitimate now than it has been in just about any time in our history. I won't say the violence is never going to occur, but I think the stuff about possible Civil War or whatever, I think that kind of stuff is completely overblown. I think that by and large, the questions around Trump are going to be resolved more or less democratically, depending on how you view voting restrictions in the United States.

I do not expect anything comparable to the mass violence that the country experienced during the Civil War when a significant portion of the population was killed. I think that's extremely unlikely in part because we are culturally far less different than we were in the 1860s. There's just simply too many cultural, economic, and political ties between us I think to rend the country in that way to where you would see hundreds of thousands of people dying on battlefields.

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Matt Peterson: Short of war, did you learn anything in looking at this history and back to David Duke's Louisiana campaigns about what happens to a party when it experiences this kind of stress? For instance, we had a member named Hank who asked, "What happens to moderate Republicans if Roy Moore is elected?"

Adam Serwer: I think the vast majority of Republicans are going to make their peace with it, because they're Republicans. It's very difficult. It's extraordinarily difficult once you see yourself as part of a team to separate yourself from that team. You are far more likely to try and rationalize decisions, say, "Oh, well, he's an exception. We're not all like that."

Roy Moore winning isn't automatically going to turn someone who is ardently anti-abortion into someone who votes for a party that believes that women should be able to decide whether or not they carry a pregnancy to term. I think for the most part, Roy Moore is not going to cause some huge rupture in the Republican party where people start leaving in droves. It may convince some people to stay home next election. I don't know. It's not going to rend the party in two.

Matt Peterson: Right. I want to go back to what we were talking about earlier about war and the state of emergency. This is a question from Robert, who asks, "We've been in this state of emergency for over a decade, as you mentioned. At what point does this become the norm? After the war ends, assuming the politics return to the state they were before the state of emergency?"

Adam Serwer: I don't think there's any going back to the status quo ante. Certainly the lesson of history in the United States is not politics became what they were before these wars, but there usually is some form of national consolidation that occurs when wars end. The war on terror is something new and unique, and I wouldn't even begin to try and predict what our politics looks like if it ever ends.

Matt Peterson: Yes. Well, let's hope it ends someday. Let me ask another question from Patrice, who wanted to know, "How do you get people to stop focusing about character flaws in our politics and instead focus on actual regulatory actions that had such significant effects?"

Adam Serwer: I don't know. Character issues matter a lot to some people. I don't know how you convince someone who thinks that character is really important in a candidate that they shouldn't care about that. I think at The Atlantic, we cover policy a great deal, and we do it in a very careful and comprehensive way. We do that because our readers care about it. I wouldn't begin to know how to convince someone who thinks that character's important that they should care about something else.

Matt Peterson: As you're looking out at the political landscape, what are the most important couple of stories that you're watching?

Adam Serwer: I think obviously the biggest story in politics right now is probably what's going to happen in the midterms. I think obviously, the consequences and fallout of Robert Mueller's investigation is really important. I also think another important

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story is the internal fight happening in the Democratic party right now over its identity and over how to respond to the Trump phenomenon.

I think there are not necessarily clear answers emerging yet, but I do think that it's pretty interesting to see the party grapple with essentially becoming a more traditionally liberal or left wing party, or continuing on the centrist path that Bill Clinton set the party on that has had advantages and drawbacks. Most notably, it kept the Clintons in office for two terms, but now people feel as though it compromised the Democratic party's ability to reach out to working people.

Matt Peterson: One of the things you mentioned in this annotation you did for Masthead was the lack of a reckoning on the part of Hillary Clinton, or maybe on the part of her supporters, for the 2008 campaign and the way that that played out against Obama. Have you seen any signs of that kind of reckoning happening for the Democratic party since the election?

Adam Serwer: No, not really, but I think that it's possible that it just won't happen now that she's exiting politics as a major force in the Democratic party. I do think that there is a non-trivial possibility that people have long memories, and they remember that campaign that Hillary Clinton ran and they remember the racialized nature of some of her appeals during that period, and it's possible that a lot of those people stayed home in part because of that.

One of the things that happened in 2016 was that black voters didn't come out in the numbers that Democrats were hoping to mobilize them in. Some of that was obviously voting restrictions that were designed to keep black people from the polls, but some of that was probably also a lack of Clinton being inspiring or being an appealing candidate to them.

Matt Peterson: You mentioned voting restrictions a couple of times. Do you think that this is going to be a significant factor in the next couple of elections?

Adam Serwer: I think it's a tremendously important factor. It's going to have a big impact on what happens in Alabama tomorrow night. I think for Republicans, there's a reason there's a voting commission helmed by a guy whose major issue in politics for the past eight years, aside from immigration, was voting restrictions. Republicans really think that this improves their chances for winning and they're going to continue pursuing them for that reason.

Matt Peterson: Speaking of that special election again, is it too easy for us to focus too much on this election because of all the weirdness around special elections generally? How much should we extrapolate from this one case that's going on right now?

Adam Serwer: I don't know what to extrapolate in terms of what's going to happen in the mid-terms. Certainly, what more numerate political observers than me are saying is that a win for Jones in a deep red state would be an indication that Democrats are highly motivated for the mid-terms and that that spells trouble for Republicans.

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Obviously, special elections are always a difficult thing to use to model for future elections in part because the electorate is so screwy depending on who's motivated, who's not, what the conditions are. In this case, you have a Republican who's credibly accused of child molestation, so that's the kind of political factor affecting a race that is impossible to account for.

Matt Peterson: Right. We can leave it there. Thank you very much for joining us.

Adam Serwer: Thank you very much.

Matt Peterson: Everybody, I appreciate your questions. Come back here next week for another conversation. All right, thanks everybody. Bye.