

Hate has no place in New Jersey. Here's why



Your Turn
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Guest columnists

Like many people these days, we watch and listen to our national politics with disappointment and concern — disappointment that the discourse too often turns personal and divisive, concern that it is slowly but surely tearing us apart.

Elected officials in Washington too often play to the extremes, making outrageous gestures with seemingly no concern for the consequences. Some do it to raise money. Some do it to get attention. Some do it because they do not know any better.

As a result, we are a nation seemingly more divided than at any time since the Civil War.

Closer to home, the story has been different. In general, New Jersey has been a place where good, thoughtful people can disagree without being disagreeable. A place where different ideas and beliefs can flourish. A place where moderation, common sense and decency usually prevail.

To be sure, that is not always the case. The tone and substance of our local politics sometimes gets heated, if not downright ugly. It sometimes gets too personal. It sometimes gets too angry. That has been true in Trenton as well as in municipalities and school districts throughout our State. But that is usually the exception to the more measured rule.



Englewood Cliffs Mayor Mario Kranjac conducts a town meeting on March 14, 2019. CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM-USA TODAY NETWORK

That is why we were both surprised and disturbed to read a New Year's message written and distributed by the Mayor of Englewood Cliffs. Simply stated, it was a vitriolic broadside full of the same hateful, divisive rhetoric that comes at us daily from Washington.

Focused largely on the issue of "critical race theory" — for some unknown reason — the mayor used his annual address as an opportunity for fear mongering and name calling. Rather than extol the virtues of his beloved town, he chose to stoke fears about some imaginary threat. Rather than speak to the substance of his concerns, he chose to denigrate others and accuse them of pursuing "un-American"

and "perverse agendas." He even claimed that our state government is "normalizing deviant and illegal behavior."

The question is "why." Why would a mayor of a small, wonderful community — one that is safe, secure and affluent — feel compelled to make such a divisive statement? Why would he use his annual address to his constituents to demonize and blame the "others" — those who are unemployed, those who are not American citizens, and those who do not share his political views? Why would he use his office to pit people against each other in an us-versus-them diatribe?

Regardless of the reason, this type of noxious, irresponsible rhetoric has no

place in New Jersey.

Here, we embrace diversity. Here, every culture has a home, and every political philosophy — conservative, liberal or moderate — is welcome. We agree. We disagree. We debate. We find common ground. We do not always get it right, but here, we pride ourselves on being good neighbors.

Granted, all elected officials have a right as well as a responsibility to express their views on the full range of issues affecting their communities, including critical race theory. That is part of their job. They owe it to their constituents. And in fact, our communities are better and stronger when we exchange different, competing ideas — when people of good will and good intention discuss policies, share perspectives and learn from each other.

The problem, however, is when elected officials use their office to cast aspersions on others and to engage in dangerous demagoguery. This type of behavior never helps us. This type of behavior only and always hurts us.

Going forward, we urge the mayor to try a more thoughtful, more productive approach to his advocacy. Indeed, we invite him to join organizations, such as the NAACP, working to bring people together and to build stronger, safer and more just communities.

After all, as Abraham Lincoln famously explained three years before the start of the Civil War, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

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