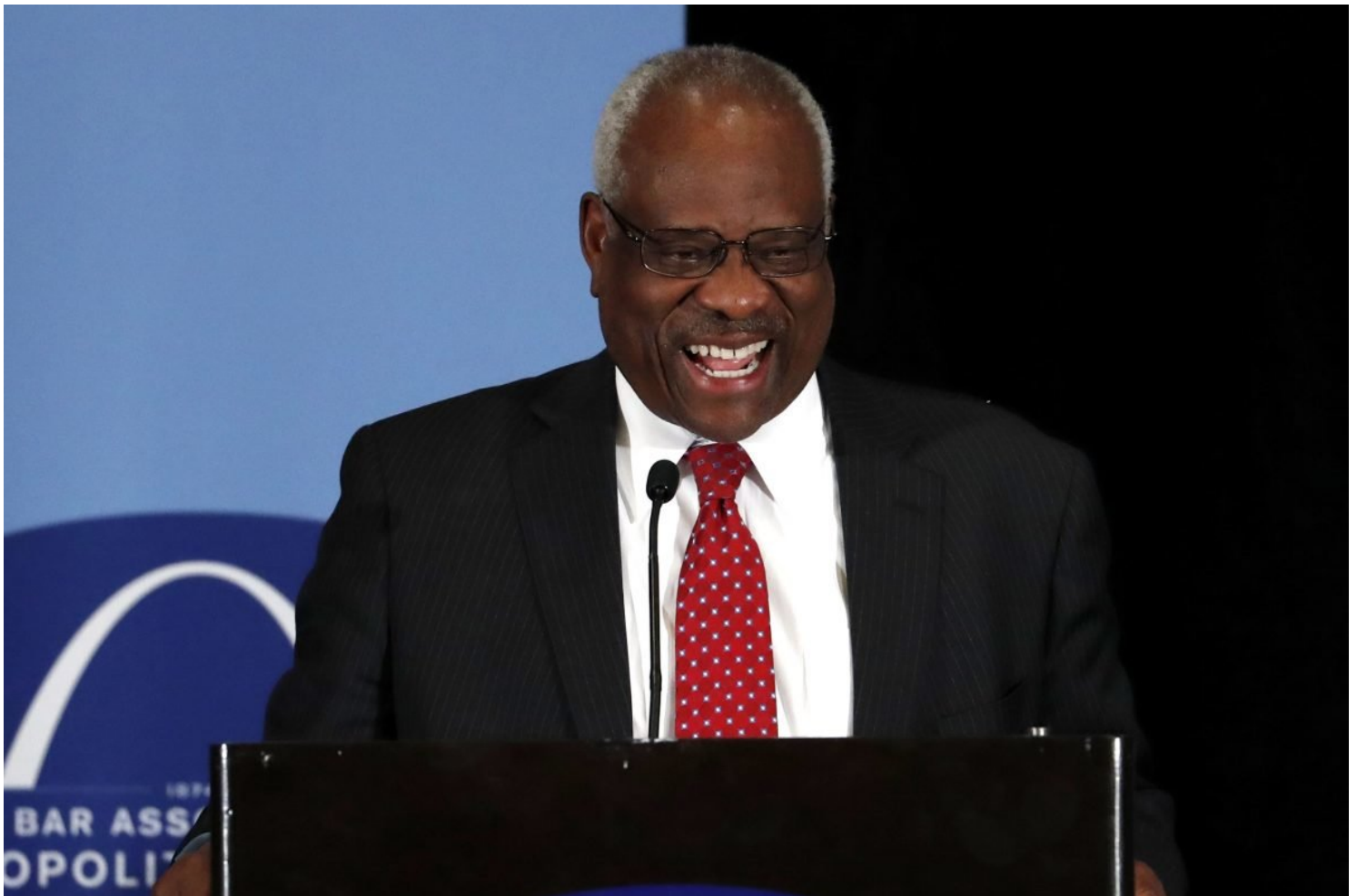


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Despite the rancor, there is much that unites Americans

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JEFF ROBERSON / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Justice Clarence Thomas speaking at the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis last spring.

by **Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan**

In a recent (and rare) television interview (<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/laura-ingraham-gets-clarence-thomas-interview/article/2639310>), Justice Clarence Thomas addressed the divisions that seem to define present-day America. “What binds us?” he asked. “What do we all have in common anymore? ... When I was a kid, even as we had laws that held us apart, there were things that we held dear and that we all had in common. ... We always talk about *e pluribus unum*. What’s our *unum* now?”

E pluribus unum, literally “out of many, one,” now seems almost incomprehensible in the United States. Years of emphasizing our differences have yielded a toxic brand of politics in which difference is less celebrated than imposed. The pervasiveness of identity politics has created victims and villains instead of Americans. One need look only to the recent disagreements over the national anthem, race, and gender to get a sense of the deep divisions that have come to define us.

For all of our differences, though, certain commonalities remain, even if they are the kind we do not typically see at first blush. More than 87 percent (<https://www.economy.com/freelunch/>) of the United States’ \$19.5 trillion economy arises from internal commerce. We do \$17 trillion worth of business with each other, and this has a unifying effect. In order to conduct this business, we use a common currency and a shared infrastructure. We share a national media, and enjoy entertainment across state boundaries. All of this is more important than we typically admit.

More than this, we enjoy mobility the rest of the globe could scarcely understand, let alone enjoy. We move from state to state with remarkable regularity. In any given year, almost eight million (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/geographic-mobility/2015/state-to-state-migration/>) Americans pick up and move to

another state. This might not seem like much given our population, but at that rate, there is a better than 85 percent chance that a person will move between states at least once over a typical lifespan.

Our pursuit of diversity, not as originally conceived but in what it has become, may be to blame. America once aspired to be the great melting pot. Immigrants brought their languages, religions, and customs as they came to the U.S., and changed and were changed by their new nation as a result. Over a generation or two, immigrants no longer knew themselves to be Irish, German, or Chinese. They were Irish American, German American, and Chinese American. And in embracing some of their new neighbors' cultures, Americans became different as well. Chinese food became standard American fare. German words were incorporated into American English. Irish dancing influenced what became Appalachian clogging. Our melting pot was a crucible in which each immigrant culture grafted American characteristics onto itself, while simultaneously contributing its own characteristics to a shared American culture. We were many, but one.

But now we build walls and warn against cultural appropriation, as if a culture is somehow proprietary to specific members of the current generation. Within these walls, we seek cultural purity rather than natural plurality. What remains is “out of many, many,” because *one* is somehow blameworthy.

And no one has more incentive to stress the many over the one than the media. Political and social discord sells, after all. In a recent Pew [survey](http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/24/political-typology-reveals-deep-fissures-on-the-right-and-left/0_1-4/) (http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/24/political-typology-reveals-deep-fissures-on-the-right-and-left/0_1-4/), though, more than 50 percent of respondents self-identified as what reasonable people would call “moderates” — people who described themselves as something between a “disaffected Democrat” and a “market skeptic Republican.” Despite media

reports to the contrary, the American public is not composed largely of antifa and alt-right reactionaries. Polls on attitudes regarding even our most divisive issues, like [abortion](http://news.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx) (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>), [gun control](http://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx) (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>), and [drug legalization](http://news.gallup.com/poll/1657/illegal-drugs.aspx) (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1657/illegal-drugs.aspx>), reveal that we tend to disagree less on our shared values than on the rank [ordering](http://news.gallup.com/poll/188918/democrats-republicans-agree-four-top-issues-campaign.aspx) (<http://news.gallup.com/poll/188918/democrats-republicans-agree-four-top-issues-campaign.aspx>) of those values. In the end, we're mostly reasonable people who merely lean slightly left or right while traveling the same path. It's time now to pay a lot more attention to that shared path.

In the end, Justice Thomas is right. We have allowed the things that divide us to take center stage. But if we take a step back and consider what is in our common interest, and embrace the unfetishized diversity that has historically been our strength, we might just find our *unum* again.

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