

THE FOLLOWING IS A TRUE STORY

On June 19, 1954, eleven boys from Oklahoma City boarded a bus bound for Robbers Cave State Park, about a hundred and fifty miles to the southeast. The boys had never met before, but all had just completed fifth grade and came from middle-income families. All were white and Protestant. When they reached the park, the boys were assigned to a cabin at an empty Boy Scout camp. They dubbed themselves the Rattlers.

The following day, a second group of boys — also all white, Protestant, and middle class — arrived at the camp. They were assigned to a cabin that could not be seen from the first. They decided to call themselves the Eagles.

For a week, the two groups went about their activities — swimming, tossing a baseball, sitting around a campfire — unaware of the other. The groups had separate swimming holes, and their meal hours were staggered, so they didn't meet at the mess hall. As they ate, played, and tussled, each band developed its own social hierarchy and, hence, its own mores. The Rattlers, for instance, took to cursing. The Eagles frowned on profanity.

Toward the end of the week, the two groups learned about each other. The reaction was swift. Each group wanted to challenge the other to a contest, and their counsellors scheduled a tournament.

On the first day, the Rattlers won at both baseball and tug-of-war. The Eagles were livid. One of them declared that the Rattlers were too big. They couldn't be fifth graders; they had to be older. The Eagles, on the way back to their cabin that evening, noticed that their rivals had attached a team flag to the backstop of the baseball field. They tore it down and set it on fire. The next morning, the two groups got into a fistfight, which had to be broken up by the counsellors.

That day, the group's positions reversed. The Eagles won the baseball game, a development they attributed to their prayers for victory and to their rivals' foul mouths. Then they won at tug-of-war. The Rattlers responded to these setbacks by raiding the Eagles' cabin after the Eagles had gone to sleep. The Eagles staged a

profanity (sb) bandeord, sjofelhed

swift (adj) hurtig

counsellor (sb) vejleder

tug-of-war (sb) tovtrækning, styrkeprøve

livid (adj) rasende

30 counterraid while their adversaries were at breakfast. Finding their beds overturned, the Rattlers accused the Eagles of being “communists.”

As tensions mounted, both groups became increasingly aggressive and self-justifying. The Rattlers decided that they’d lost at baseball because the Eagles had better bats. They turned a pair of jeans they’d stolen from the Eagles into a banner, 35 and marched around with it. The Eagles accused the Rattlers of cowardice, for having staged their raid at night. They stockpiled rocks for use in case of another incursion. When the Eagles won the tournament, each boy received a medal and a penknife. The Rattlers immediately stole them.

At this point, members of both groups announced that they wanted nothing more to 40 do with the other. But their counsellors, who were really grad students, were just getting going. They brought the bands together for another contest — of the sort that only a social scientist could love. Hundreds of beans were strewn in the dirt, and each boy was given a minute to collect as many as he could in a paper bag. Then, one by one, the boys were called up and the contents of their bags ostensibly 45 projected onto a screen for everyone to count. In fact, the bags were never opened; the same beans were projected onto the screen over and over, in different arrangements. The Rattlers saw what they wanted to, and so did the Eagles. By the former’s reckoning, each Rattler had gathered, on average, ten per cent more beans than his rivals. By the latter’s, the Eagles were the better bean-picker-uppers by a 50 margin of twenty per cent.

The whole elaborate experiment is now regarded as a classic of social psychology. The participants had been chosen because they were so much alike. All it took for them to come to loathe one another was a different totem animal and a contest for some penknives. In the aftermath of the Second World War, these results were 55 unsettling. They still are.

SOURCE

Elizabeth Kolbert: “How Politics Got So Polarized”. The New Yorker, 27 December 2021. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/how-politics-got-so-polarized>

adversary (sb) modstander, fjende

incursion (sb) indtrængen

penknife (sb) lommekniv

grad student (= graduate student, sb) en universitetsstuderende på kandidatniveau

ostensibly (adv) angiveligt, tilsyneladende