

Renegade Files®

Episode Title:

Us vs. Them: How To Choose Neither in a Divided World – RF089

MP3 File Name: RF089-Us-vs-Them

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Podcast RSS Feed: <https://feeds.blubrry.com/feeds/renegadefiles.xml>

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This is Renegade Files Episode 89, Us vs. Them: How To Choose Neither in a Divided World.

When speaking about the two political parties in Jamaica, Bob Marley asked, “*How can something that divides us, ever bring us together?*”

Our current political system is no different.

And if you imagine that one side is good, and the other side is bad, then you have fallen for their trap of division, that pretends to seek your support for one side, but in reality, only seeks your participation, *in the division*.

But the Us-versus-Them mindset runs far deeper than DNC and GOP—it’s written into our history, our psychology, even our myths.

On this episode we dive deep into something that’s been with us since the very beginning of human consciousness—an invisible force that shapes how we see each other, how we form groups, and how we so often end up declaring war on one another: The Us-Versus-Them Mentality.

And as mentioned, this isn’t just politics, although politics thrives on it. It’s not just religion, though religion wrote some of its earliest and most compelling scripts. And it’s not merely human nature, although it’s wired into the ways we have evolved.

And yet, it’s deeper than all of this.

In a world built on sides, what happens if we refuse to play the game? This episode unravels the ancient roots of division and explores a third path to clarity and peace. In this episode, we'll uncover why the world divides us—and how, together, you and I can rise above that divide.

If that sounds good to you, then come with me now into Renegade Files Episode 89, *Us vs. Them: How To Choose Neither in a Divided World*.

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Episode Text

Hello and Welcome my friend, to Renegade Files — the podcast where we shine colorful lights into the dark corners of Unsolved Mysteries, Paranormal Phenomena, and Fringe Culture Analysis.

I'm your host, Lex Gordon, broadcasting from the Jungle Villa Outpost, Deep in the Uncharted Tropics.

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In this episode we will analyze this subject in four parts:

In Part 1 we'll look into the origins of the dualistic worldview—how religion, myth, and even the natural world seems to tell us a story of “two sides,” and how that story actually traps us.

Part 2 explores the history of the American two-party political system, and how that binary framework was proactively engineered as a tool of social control.

In Part 3 we'll consider how modern politics—both left and right—weaponize empathy and safety, reframing control as either kindness or security, depending on the angle.

And we will wrap it all up in Part 4, when we find ways to move beyond this endless cycle, to see the world through a wider lens, and actually find a little peace, even as the world screams at us to pick a side for our own good.

Part 1: The Origins of Us-Versus-Them

From the earliest recollections of the human experience, we have noticed cyclical patterns in the natural world. Day and night. Life and death. Sun and moon. Male and female. Summer and winter.

The universe seems to hum in a binary rhythm—a cosmic drumbeat of pauses between pairs of opposites.

And so as we tried to connect with the wider cosmos, we imagined the gods in twos as well: gods of light and darkness, good and evil, chaos and order, saints and fallen angels.

These dualities seemed to mirror the natural world, and in fact, some cultures integrated the two, describing the moon as a goddess, and the sun as their fiery god.

And long before Christianity or Islam, The Zoroastrians framed the cosmos as a battle between *Ahura Mazda*, the lord of light, and *Angra Mainyu*, the lord of darkness. This is dualism in its rawest form. A personification of the entire observable Universe into two opposing Gods at war.

Then the hope of the juggernaut monotheistic religions was to unite the world under one Supreme Being, and vanquish the traps of division. But instead these institutions fell back on the familiar territory of dualism.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam built their foundations on lines in the sand. They divided us once more into believers and the non-believers, the saved and the damned... God's chosen, and everyone else.

And when a worldview tells you that eternal paradise is the reward for one group, and eternal torment is the destiny of the other, that's not just us versus them—that's infinity versus oblivion. It doesn't get more high-stakes than that.

Once again, the environment itself seemed to reinforce this black-and-white vision of reality. Every morning, the sun rose. Every night, it fell. The tides rose and retreated. We were born. We died.

And so we began to describe our children as the lazy one and the ambitious one. The artistic or the mechanically inclined. The introvert or the extrovert.

Now we label everything as pairs of opposites, then we project that paradigm onto nature and it supplies endless optical illusions that support our idea that reality is always split in two, and we believe it. We see proof of duality everywhere we look for it.

But here's the problem. This is not actually the case.

Yes, there is night and day—but in between, there's dusk, dawn, and a thousand shifting shades of light. There's life and death—but in between, there's growing, aging, sickness, healing, learning, decay, and transformation. The tide isn't high or low across the world all at once, but rather is in constant motion, endlessly flowing through a spectrum of levels that flood deeper in one area by draining shallower in another.

Reality is not binary. It's a continuum.

But humans, desperate for simplicity, carved the world into teams. We called them tribes. Then nations. Then parties. And we learned to feel safe with our group—and to fear, or even hate, the other groups.

Psychologists call this in-group/out-group bias. We are hardwired to trust people who look like us, talk like us, worship like us. And we are equally wired to be suspicious of outsiders. It's a survival instinct.

This instinct became the soil in which politics, religion, and ideology planted their roots. And over time, those roots grew into walls.

Imagine that you are traveling alone on a great trek across wild lands to visit an exotic city of legend. With miles to go you find yourself within a vast desert. Crossing it is the more direct road, but far more harsh than a detour to either

side. To the east, a river with cool yet curving paths, and so a longer journey. To the west a higher road, easier to walk but farther still to reach it

On one horizon, the sun is setting—on the other, the moon is rising. You feel the pull of two worlds, as if reality itself is asking you to choose. What kinds of settlements populate the high road at the western horizon? What manner of travelers frequent the lush river passage to the east? But here's the trick: no one lives on a horizon. We all and always live in the exact middle between them—where light and shadow overlap, where the desert night hums with hidden life. That's the place the world forgets to show us.

So the illusion of a world divided is exactly that, and although we have framed our viewpoints as if only left or right exist, the experience of living is much more complex than black and white.

Let's move on from here, and learn a bit about how we got here.

Part 2: The Two-Party System in America

The framers of the Constitution were deeply suspicious of political factions. George Washington himself warned against them in his farewell address in 1796.

He said that the divisive nature of political parties might create an "us versus them" mentality, destroying the common good in favor of narrow, partisan agendas. He said, quote:

"The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism."

Washington believed that political parties would become "potent engines" by which cunning and unprincipled men could subvert the will of the people.

And when speaking of political opposition, Abraham Lincoln told us that if America was ever to be destroyed, it would be from within as infighting posed the dangers of self-sabotage.

And—spoiler alert—they were right.

The United States began with multiple factions: Federalists, Anti-Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, Whigs, Free men, Rebels, and more. But over time, the complexity collapsed into a neat, binary system: Democrats versus Republicans.

Why? Because two parties are easy to control.

Think of it like a casino. The house always wins, but the gamblers are too busy arguing over red or black to notice.

The two-party political system in the U.S. began to take shape during the presidency of George Washington, primarily through the formation of the Federalist Party by Alexander Hamilton and the Democratic-Republican Party by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. These factions emerged from political disagreements over the power of the federal government and the interpretation of the Constitution.

Alexander Hamilton was a leading figure in creating the Federalist Party, which advocated for a strong central government and a robust financial system.

Thomas Jefferson co-founded the Democratic-Republican Party, opposing Hamilton's vision of centralized control, and favoring a more free and decentralized approach that respected both states' rights and the rights of the individual.

Political factions began to emerge during the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. The Federalists and Anti-Federalists formed around differing views on the power of the federal government.

This grew into what was called The First Party System in the U.S., which lasted from 1792 to 1824, and this system consisted of the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party as the two dominant parties.

The Federalists were primarily supported by business interests in the North, while the Democratic-Republicans drew support from agrarian communities in the South. This early political landscape laid the groundwork for the enduring two-party system we have in the US today.

Yet John Adams, the nation's second president, expressed concerns about the rise of such parties, and described them as, quote, "the greatest political evil..."

He believed that having two opposing political parties would inevitably lead to each of them prioritizing their own interests above those of the country, resulting in corruption and political gridlock.

(But, hey, those founding fathers were just dusty old white men who lived in dumber times and had no clue about our world today, right?)

Fast forward a few hundred years into the age of the great robber barons and turn of the century banker-industrialists, and we have the likes of JP Morgan, JD Rockefeller, and the Rothschilds who went to great lengths to assure the solidification of a two-party system in the US, all while centralizing global banking

and industry in such a way as to profit from the Us Vs. Them framework on a global scale.

They would print fortunes by financing both sides of a war, making steel and the resulting machinery of war for both the Axis powers and the Allied forces. And when the smoke cleared, they would sell the building materials to rebuild both the losers and the winners, and give them loans with interest to pay for it all.

Without two sides to fight each other, there would be neither Rockefellers nor Rothschilds. Division fuels their enterprise and has for centuries. They donate to both parties, and fleece the constituents of each with equal enthusiasm.

And why is such a system so advantageous to those in control?

Because with two parties, you don't need to represent the full spectrum of human thought. You just need to divide the pie into two halves, give people a side to root for, and let them fight it out forever.

We see this in the mainstream media at an alarming rate, wherein virtually every event is framed as the fault of one or the other political party, depending on the news source, and these arguments have become, basically, exact mirrors of one another.

One channel tells us that a country with a border is racist, while another tells us that a country without a border is unsafe, but the reality is that a border is largely what defines a country at all, and both sides need the border to have the argument at all.

In a very thorough and complex paper called "Same Words, Different Meanings: Semantic Polarization in Broadcast Media Language Forecasts Polarization on Social Media Discourse," written by Xiaohan Ding, Mike Horning, and Eugenia H. Rho, from Virginia Tech in 2023, used extensive mathematical models to analyze decades of TV news closed captioning text, and concluded that opposing TV news outlets, in this case CNN and Fox, will use the exact same polarizing terms such as "racist", "racism", "police", "immigrant", "immigration", "climate change", "global warming", and "health care" to frame problems and solutions from opposing perspectives that are virtual mirrors of each other.

They also discovered that the Television discourse has a direct impact on social media discourse.

Let's read just a short passage from this incredibly complex paper:

Quote:

“The rising levels of semantic polarity between the two major broadcast news organizations, as demonstrated in our work may render people’s ability, to reach across partisan divides and to perceive and solve issues democratically, more difficult. The way CNN and Fox News discuss identical keywords on their programs is remarkably distinct in 2020 where semantic polarity between the two stations reaches its peak over an 11-year period, corroborating the widening partisan media gap highlighted by recent scholarship. Framing Theory argues that even subtle changes in the wording around how an issue is described by the media can significantly influence how audiences interpret the issue (Scheufele 2000; Entman 2003).

Yet, our findings show that the contextual language driving semantic polarization in broadcast media is not nuanced at all. The surrounding words that characterize how each station discusses topically important keywords are drastically different, to the extent that identical words seem to reflect different meanings altogether.

This is a crucial point of consideration, as linguistic cues in the media can play a powerful role in selectively reifying certain aspects of the perceived reality of an issue while downplaying others. Our findings suggest that TV news language does not only shape how online audiences perceive issues, but also how they talk about them.”

Endquote.

So this system thrives on division. It feeds on outrage and tribal loyalty, and rewards politicians who can paint the other side as dangerous, corrupt, or even inhuman.

It’s no coincidence that our political discourse sounds more like sports or even war commentary, than thoughtful debate. We cheer for our team, we boo the other side, and the owners of the stadium rake in the ticket sales.

We give our side total free reign without question or criticism, and why not; they are obviously the good guys, always right, and concerned for us.

And we dismiss any and every idea or plan from the other side summarily and without consideration, and why not;’ they are idiots, criminals, and care only for their own interests.

Do you see how both of those arguments are perfectly interchangeable? Tap the little rewind loop and listen to them again, and imagine a Republican saying both, and then a Democrat. The transition between these opposites proclaiming that passage is seamless. It’s uncanny.

Perspective such as this reveals this trick of opposition-framing that the larger system thrives on.

The two-party system was not designed to empower the people. It was designed to manage them.

And it works brilliantly—because it taps into that ancient, primal instinct of duality: us versus them.

And when this message is delivered through the powerful and convincing medium of television, particularly through the authority of the news (a self-assigned authority but an authority nonetheless) then it influences the very ways we look at our world.

> "You turn on the news and it feels like a ritual. Two figures stand on a stage, throwing words like stones, their faces lit by spotlights. The audience roars for one, then the other. Entire news networks frame their competitors as brutally ignorant or even evil. Your happiness... indeed your very life depends on you trusting us, and ignoring them. On this media stage, the players battle each other like gladiators, and fight for your very life.

But if you step back, you notice the stage itself—the lights, the cameras, the curtain. It doesn't matter who shouts louder. It doesn't matter who wins the battle. And the catch is, no one is trying to, or even designed to, win this battle; the battle itself is the play that is being produced. No solution is even considered. No winning and reasonable alternative is ever suggested. And this play was written long before you sat down to watch."

Part 3: The Myths of Liberal Empathy and Conservative Safety

Now let's fast-forward again, from the evolution of this situation, and into the present moment, where politics has become a 24/7 media circus, and where both sides have learned to weaponize the same tools in different ways.

In this section I'll pull back the curtain to reveal a clever way that our opposing political parties both play the same game of control.

By reducing the emotional narratives of both sides down to their skeletal foundations, we quickly realize, in very simple language, that both sides are driving us toward an authoritarian outcome of control. Control of the masses by the power elite, leadership, permanent political class.

So how do they do this? I'll illustrate one way.

But before I do, remember to put aside any reflexive defense you may have for your own political views, and hear this concept as a whole. This section isn't describing an opposition, it's describing cooperation. So let's explore this situation from both sides through to the end, to hear this without judgement.

Ok here we go.

Both political parties drive us consistently toward less freedoms for the people, and more control for the power elite.

On the political left, this control is always packaged as compassion. "We're doing this to save something fragile. For your health. For the marginalized. For the children."

On the right, control is always packaged as security. "We're doing this to keep you safe. To preserve tradition. To defend the family. To protect the nation."

And what they both ask of us becomes two sides of the same coin.

The left tells us, "Relinquish your old freedoms to save someone else. If you are not with us, you are not kind, you are not understanding, you have no empathy. If we could only save one person, then your loss of that freedom is worth the sacrifice."

While the right tells us, "Relinquish your old freedoms to so we can monitor the reckless, so we can control the depraved, and save morality. If you are not with us, you are foolish, you are shortsighted, you have no common sense. If we could prevent one crime, then your loss of that freedom is worth the sacrifice."

...

The Substack article **The Myth of Liberal Empathy** makes an important point: the left often disguises authoritarian policies as acts of kindness. Think of censorship in the name of protecting marginalized voices. Or quarantines for people who aren't sick, in the name of public health. The message is: "We know what's best for you, and if you disagree, you're not just wrong—you're cruel."

Meanwhile, the right frames its own authoritarianism in terms of order and security. Surveillance in the name of fighting terrorism. Restrictions in the name of protecting family values. The message is: "We know what's best for you, and if you disagree, you're not just wrong—you're in danger."

Notice the symmetry. Both sides justify enhancing their control, expanding their authority, and deepening their reach. Both sides moralize their own authority over you. One uses kindness, the other uses safety.

And the citizen is trapped between them, left with an impossible choice: choose your tyrant.

...

Don't you think that if one of our political parties was clearly for dictatorship, while the other was clearly a Lazai Fair champion of liberty, that the outcome would be swift and obvious?

But this isn't the case. They both talk in platitudes and do the opposite once elected. They speak in impassioned statements that are clinically true, but bereft of meaning from their excessive use as a thought-terminating clichés.

This is the great trick of the modern age. Not only have we been divided into "us versus them," but the terms of that division have been carefully curated so that no matter which side you pick, you're still controlled.

And the triggers they install are emotional ones. Because emotional choices abandon logic and reason, and rely on inflammatory rhetoric, sarcasm, and the continual leveraging of opposites.

It's as if we have wandered into a carnival. On one side, a vendor offers masks painted with smiles, promising kindness and progress. On the other, masks painted like shields, promising safety and strength. The crowd presses you to choose, to put on a mask and join the march. But none of the masks actually fit your face. Wearing each is a burden and a falsehood. And in that moment, you realize the trick: the carnival isn't about which mask you wear—it's about distracting you, so you never leave the tent.

But there is a way out of this emotional trap of opposing choices. To approach the way out we must first Widen our perspective.

If you aren't driving, and when you can, close your eyes. Picture the Earth as seen from space: no borders, no flags, no left, no right. Just a blue and white planet spinning silently in space. Way down on the surface we build walls, we draw lines, we invent conflicts, we buy clothing for our team, and we pray for the other teams to lose.

But from our distant view in space, the whole game disappears. What's left is something older than politics—older than religion—older than sports. What's left is just one living organic home, holding, feeding, and nurturing us all.

Part 4: Finding Peace in a Divided World

So where does this leave us?

We can see the us-versus-them mentality at work everywhere. It's in politics, sure, but it's also in culture wars, sports rivalries, even the way we talk about technology—Apple versus Android, science versus religion, Human versus Ai.

The world trains us to pick sides. To define ourselves by what we oppose.

But here's the secret: you don't have to play that game.

Peace is not found in choosing the "right" side. Peace is found in stepping outside the binary.

Here are a few ways to start:

1. See the spectrum. Remind yourself that reality isn't black and white. It's shades of gray, colors, textures, nuances. When you feel yourself thinking in absolutes, pause and look for the continuum. It's like the old joke about the guy who isn't a Democrat or a Republican, and all he wants to do is love Jesus, smoke a joint, shoot his rifle, and go to his gay friend's wedding.
2. Refuse the bait. Media thrives on outrage because outrage keeps you glued to the screen. Don't take the bait. When you see headlines designed to trigger, step back. Ask yourself: Who benefits from me being angry right now? Who is financing both sides of that argument?
3. Practice empathy without control. Real empathy doesn't mean forcing others to agree with you "for their own good." It means listening, understanding, and allowing space for differences.
4. Find common ground. Most people, regardless of politics, want the same basic things: safety, opportunity, community, meaning. Start there.
5. Reconnect with the natural world. Nature is the great teacher of balance. Spend time outside. Watch the tide not as high or low, but as a flow. Watch the sky not as night or day, but as infinite gradations of light. Spend time on the boardwalk and watch the ocean without your phone, just for 5 minutes. See how it feels.

Ultimately, peace is not about ending conflict. Conflict will always exist. Peace is about refusing to let the conflicts define you.

The us-versus-them mentality is as old as humanity. But we are not condemned to it. We can choose a third path. A path of nuance. A path of balance. A path of understanding. When you talk with your friends, don't simply try to recall that clever thing the news woman said and repeat it, but rather listen to their ideas and think naturally. Be yourself, not the mirror of some division draped over your mind by someone else's agenda.

The next time the world tells you to pick a side, remember: you are free to see a bigger picture.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Thank you sincerely for investigating “Us vs. Them: How To Choose Neither in a Divided World,” with me.

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I'm so glad to have **you** in the Renegade Files Crew.

Thanks for listening. Stay curious, be yourself, and keep it Renegade.

Until we meet again, I'm your host Lex Gordon...

Stay Wild, Summer Child!