



Republican Like Me: A Lifelong Democrat's Journey Across the Aisle

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The former CEO of NPR set out for conservative America to find out why these people are so wrong about everything. It turns out, they weren't.

Ken Stern watched the increasing polarization of our country with growing concern. As a longtime partisan Democrat himself, he felt forced to acknowledge that his own views were too parochial, too absent of any exposure to the "other side." In fact, his urban neighborhood is so liberal, he couldn't find a single Republican--even by asking around.

So for one year, he crossed the aisle to spend time listening, talking, and praying with Republicans of all stripes. With his mind open and his dial tuned to the right, he went to evangelical churches, shot a hog in Texas, stood in pit row at a NASCAR race, hung out at Tea Party meetings and sat in on Steve Bannon's radio show. He also read up on conservative wonkery and consulted with the smartest people the right has to offer.

What happens when a liberal sets out to look at issues from a conservative perspective? *Some of his dearly cherished assumptions about the right slipped away.* *Republican Like Me* reveals what lead him to change his mind, and his view of an increasingly polarized America.

Republican Like Me: A Lifelong Democrat's Journey Across the Aisle Details

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From Reader Review Republican Like Me: A Lifelong Democrat's Journey Across the Aisle for online ebook

Reader says

Disappointing and contains "F" bombs.

Kimberly says

NOTES:

Our political perspective is often shaped by what others are suggesting we should think rather than by any careful and independent consideration of the issues.

When we identify with a team, it changes how we perceive the world, not just opinions but the facts as well.

We are becoming angrier and more polarized not because of increasing issue disagreement but because we are increasingly participating in groupthink.

Republican Like Me is a book about what happens when a liberal sets out to look at issues from a conservative perspective.

I have long suspected that I wouldn't like many Republicans if I mixed with them on a regular basis. But I am choosing to find out. That means spending time with Fox, and Breitbart, and listening to commentary I have avoided for much of my life. It means going to evangelical church for the first time, hunting in Texas, standing in pit row at a NASCAR race, and hanging out at Tea Party meetings.

My bubble is not just a liberal bubble; it is a cultural bubble as well. There just aren't a whole lot of hunters, gun collectors, survivalists, or military personnel, for instance, hanging around Hobart Street or NPR or Yale Law School, and I don't think I have ever heard anyone in my circle carry on about "Second Amendment rights," other than to argue that the Founders meant to confer rights on militias, not every yahoo who practices saying "go ahead, punk, make my day" in front of a mirror.

Gun deaths in the United States come from two sources, almost exclusively: suicides, and urban violence involving handguns.

In 2013, there were 21,335 firearm-related suicides in the United States, 63 percent of all firearm deaths.

Because there are so many ways to obtain guns in a weapons-saturated market, restrictive ownership laws, such as in Chicago, have never really reduced violence; however, better policing, smarter drug control laws, and shared economic success have.

About six times more people are killed each year with knives than with rifles, and Colonel Mustard with the candlestick is decidedly more dangerous—almost twice as many people were killed in 2014 with a blunt instrument as with any type of rifle, let alone an AR-15.

Mack, who turns out to be a uniform sales rep from Houston, puzzles on the question for a bit and then

confesses that he carries a pistol because everyone carries one: “It’s America. It’s Texas. You carry a gun.”

I ask everyone whether they have ever had to use their gun to defend themselves, but as it turns out, DGUs (defensive gun use) usually happen to someone else.

We plainly have a major gun violence problem in this country, but liberals seem fairly obsessed with condemning lawful gun owners.

I once asked John Lott, somewhat in exasperation: if every gun control scheme was destined to fail, then what would work to reduce gun homicides? Without a pause, Lott said, “Legalize drugs.”

There is an ugly and angry iconography spread across the Nation’s Gun Show. Some of it is pro-gun or pro-Trump, but mostly it is anti: anti-Obama, anti-Democrat, anti-urban, anti-neighbor. I can buy a cutout of Hillary Clinton to use for target practice (I don’t), a T-shirt that reads “Hitler, Stalin, Castro, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, and Obama.”

I have rarely been inside a church or a synagogue for almost forty years. And if I wanted a cold start in religion, I wouldn’t have picked evangelicals, since according to Footloose and other important sociological studies that I have relied on for my sense of the evangelical community, they are all narrow-minded, intolerant, and out of step with the modern world.

Like many people I’ve met in my travels, they care passionately about one or two issues (in this case abortion, most pointedly) and feel that America has lost its moral core. They believe the church, not government, should be the center of society, and that makes them instinctively skeptical of Washington, even though some of them work directly in the orbit of the federal government.

But there is another side of the story: one of a man who knows his audience, an audience that is equally indifferent to the nuances of policy and just wants a champion who will fight their fight, build their wall, and perhaps restore America to the time when the white working class was more than a punch line in a Stephen Colbert monologue.

Whites already think of themselves as a minority “in their own country,” as it was occasionally phrased to me.

If the wall is a metaphor for anything, it is for a bold stand against this ascendant view of the future and a statement of “not so fast,” that this future is as much a cause for concern as it is a source of celebration. This explains why immigration and the Great Wall of Trump have been most popular among older audiences—those ages 45–64 and more dramatically those ages 65 or over—even though immigration poses far less of an economic challenge to those age groups.

He sees the current economic and political climate as stacked against anyone who is not part of a special protected class. For Dan, blacks, Latinos, women, and gays all receive heightened attention in the American political system, and he sees Trump as a way to “stir the pot” and get adequate attention to his needs.

A week before the election a poll showed that 51 percent of white working-class voters did not believe that Trump had “a sense of decency”—yet they voted overwhelmingly for him because they believed that he was the person most likely to disrupt the status quo, which had served them so poorly in recent years, and to break the rules they have concluded are unfairly stacked against them.

If the fatal flaw in the conservative mindset is to ignore or dispute inconvenient facts, the parallel enthusiasm of progressives is to take these same facts and require vast governmental solutions for them.

The profits from coal were enormous but they were rarely reinvested into Appalachia. Instead they padded the fortunes of numerous great eastern families and were poured into the economies and coffers of those families' hometowns.

President Obama declared in the 2015 State of the Union address that “no challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.” Prince Charles intoned at the Paris Climate Summit, “Humanity faces many threats but none is greater than climate change. In damaging our climate we are becoming the architects of our own destruction.”

Even if the United States eliminated all of its carbon dioxide emissions, global warming would be only held back by two-tenths of a degree.

In its most rudimentary form, creationism and evolution are offered up as two equal and competing theories, neither of them provable by human observation.

Noah traveled with only 8,000 species, but today there are somewhere north of 8.7 million animal species on earth. It is a head scratcher on both sides of the equation: why were so few species created before the Flood, and why did the process of species diversification accelerate so rapidly afterward, to the tune of about a dozen new species every day for 4,000 years? It makes no sense.

If you are inclined to take the Bible literally, you will forgive the gaps in the logic—and millions and millions of Americans do.

Liberals will ignore the scientific consensus just as easily as conservatives do. For decades now, liberal groups have waged wars against genetically modified organisms (GMOs), branding them “Frankenfood” and accusing “Big Food” of poisoning future generations.

Fear of GMOs flies completely in the face of the scientific consensus—a consensus that is as strong or even stronger than the scientific consensus on climate change—that GMOs are perfectly safe. That is the view of the World Health Organization, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

Real harm is caused by efforts to reduce or eliminate GMOs from the agricultural food supply. GMOs reduce soil damaging tillage, curtail carbon emissions, eliminate the need for some insecticide use, and allow the reduction of the most harmful toxic insecticides in favor of more mild ones. More important, GMOs, which tend to be far more efficiently produced, could play a critical role in expanding the global food supply.

Carbon emissions have fallen dramatically, by 12 percent (or 750 million metric tons) between 2005 and 2015.

Carbon emissions in the United States have fallen more than 20 percent on a per capita basis, and that is largely due to the expansion of natural gas production.

If you are born poor today, you have no better chance of escaping poverty than if you were born in 1964.

It is certainly not fair to blame our poverty programs for all of that failure, but it is nonetheless a rather

negative bottom line to a half century of government intervention.

There is a comprehensive through-line in conservative thinking about the importance and power of work, that work, jobs, and fulfilling responsibilities are an essential ingredient of the human character and of creating purpose in life. And that one of the central purposes of government is to put people to work.

Republicans and Democrats alike agree that poverty programs should be transitional in nature, that they should help people get back on their feet (58 percent) rather than just support people who are poor (38 percent).

Social media has created two seemingly contradictory trends - it has encouraged reckless, often outlandish, public comments and at the same time as imposed groupthink and uniformity of mind.

By and large, in face-to-face conversations, people typically try to be thoughtful and respectful and open to others. In social media, they are just mostly assholes.

For the true populist, there is no difference at all: both parties, regardless of their minor stylistic differences, serve the current order and have preserved it at the expense of the people. The growing wealth inequities, the failure to hold individuals criminally accountable for the financial meltdown, and the offshoring of jobs as facilitated by NAFTA and China's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) have all served as powerful proof points in this regard.

The rise of Trump reflects the fact that the Republican Party, at least for now, has become not a party of ideas but a party of grievances.

The notion that we are better than you - smarter, faster, prettier, cleaner, whatever - is an instant identity mechanism in humans and gives people meaning and a sense of place in a difficult, sometimes painful world. Group labels, even randomly assigned ones, are powerful because being part of a group provides validation and context for us and helps explain how we fit into an increasingly complicated and rootless society.

Politics in this way becomes more about winning and defeating others and less about finding common solutions.

If we venture outside our bubbles, we might see things a little differently. We all need to get outside our red or blue bubble when we can.

Emma Roller, wrote that "the strongest bias in American politics is not a liberal bias or a conservative bias; it is a confirmation bias, or the urge to believe only things that confirm what you already believe to be true."

Meg D says

A self-described lifelong, die-hard liberal and former NPR CEO choosing to leave his (again) self-described liberal bubble life to explore how the other half live in an attempt to find common ground and shared values? Well, consider me interested.

I will admit that I appreciate Stern's candidness about his own insular life and his attempt to see beyond it. In a polarized world where, as Stern finds, people are actually choosing not just their friends but their

neighborhoods by political singularity, I support the idea behind this book. I can't imagine it made him a very popular person on his self-described 95% democratic DC neighborhood and for this bravery I applaud his efforts.

The positives: Stern shines in his research and stats, especially when coupled with his actual face-to-face conversations with the people he previously admitted to looking down on, scorning and otherwise dismissing as uneducated loser racists. His knowledge of statistics is outstanding and used in a way that tells an incredible story of this country on issues related to gun control (such a timely chapter), religion and employment. The man has done his homework. The statistics alone would make this a re-read for me. And Stern himself acknowledges that his greatest biases were mostly notably confronted and challenged when he actually sat down to just simply talk to conservatives. In fact, he ends the book with a statement to this effect - that if we did more talking and listening instead of yelling and isolating, we might be a lot better off. Additionally, Stern does an okay job of making at least an attempt to balance out each side - such that neither side really comes out looking good here. Or at least he reveals to some degree the same flaws in both. To that end, his willingness to see the liberal flaws demonstrated some pretty solid insight. He definitely heaps the criticisms far more of the conservatives at least 2-1 here, but given his own background, he gets credit for at least trying. His ultimate conclusions - that both statistics and his experiences have taught him that the vast majority are far more alike than different regardless of politics - left me with more hope than I've had in a while.

The negatives: Despite the premise of the book, Stern at times does fall victim to his own narrative and bias. This seems to occur most when he uses his research, but then he draws conclusions without challenging it against the conversations with actual people. For example, he does a knock-out job of detailing the decline of jobs and the impact on small towns, and how this has led to the domino effect in so many different ways. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, is like, "So while there's all this hopelessness and fear of no future, people are afraid minorities are going to take their resources.....so racism." I was like ??? No, maybe people just want jobs - a sentiment that he does seem to make at an earlier point, which makes the later racism conclusion even more confusing. Additionally, Stern chooses to seek out the stereotypical rural, religious, uneducated, coal miner-type mountain people who all conservatives get lumped in with to try to understand the larger conservative perspective. To his credit he comes away owning that conservatives are far more diverse than he ever imagined. However, at the same time, he generally ignores the huge population of educated professionals who live in urban areas and don't necessarily hunt or mine for coal but do believe in personal liberties and small government who also happen to be conservatives.

The most disappointing chapter was the media one - he spends most of it focused on the extreme right media and the anger that runs through it - and almost totally ignores the left-wing media (and there are plenty of them) and what they contribute to the growing divisiveness and anger. After doing an okay job of trying to balance this through the rest of this book, this chapter felt incredibly one-sided. Since the 2016 election, there have been several studies that show huge biases in the media against the right (and more specifically Trump), but Stern mostly mentions this is passing. As a former media guy himself, this was oddly both surprising and expected.

Overall, I enjoyed this book - the premise, research and attempts to find common ground at a time when it feels simply impossible to find. I certainly don't see this willingness toward civility in a lot of "friends" and even most of my family (who openly admits to cutting people out of their life if they are republicans, so yeah, holidays are fun). Stern took a leap to try to close this gap and for that I appreciate him. I will admit that at times I felt angry at some of his conclusions (mostly the ones that seem like, despite his extensive research to the contrary, he still defaulted to his own bias of "conservatives are racists!" Or "conservatives are science deniers" for example). But while I may not always agree with some of his conclusions about

conservatives - dang, it's a hell of a solid attempt.

Roger Leonhardt says

Terrible, sarcastic book. I was hoping to get an honest view from the left, but must look elsewhere.

Leslie Ann says

3.5 stars. As a coastal liberal, I appreciated Ken Stern's reaching across the aisle (or diving into the heartland) to explore issues such as gun control, religion, and the economy. He sums up:

Getting outside my liberal bubble, I found plenty to admire about conservative thinking: the notion of a moral order in a time of social uncertainty, skepticism about the effectiveness of government at a time when the stories of bureaucratic intrusion and ineffectiveness are becoming more and more obvious, faith in the power of the individual in a free society.

His experiences helped dispel some of my conceptions of Republicans and illuminated situations when Democrats fall into the same trap (e.g., not believing the safety of GMOs). His treatment, however, is uneven. For example, I really love his story of how a gay mayor of Portland and prominent evangelical leader worked together to help turn around a failing school. But he leaves the reader in the lurch when he claims that an author of a controversial study on gun control thinks the best way to reduce gun homicides is to legalize drugs, and does not explain how.

Matt says

A better, more polished version of this review is available at The Smart Set:
<https://thesmartset.com/republican-li...>

In the wake of the 2016 election, journalists and political commentators have been falling all over themselves to report on the plight of the so-called "white working class." I hate to use the scare quotes, but the term is much less distinctive than it once was. We are all proletarians now: economic instability is keenly felt all over the country, at all levels of society, and not just among white people, either. Recent bestsellers like Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* prove that there is a considerable market for books addressing the economic, political, and cultural gaps between city and country, between left and right. The latest of these is Ken Stern's *Republican Like Me: How I Left the Liberal Bubble and Learned to Love the Right*.

Stern, the former CEO of NPR and a lifelong Democrat, was inspired to write the book after realizing that while his D.C. neighborhood celebrated diversity of all kinds, he didn't personally know any conservatives or even know anybody who did. He decided to take a year-long trip through red states to better understand the ways of the right. Stern's approach is well-intentioned but essentially flawed- just because he happens to live in a liberal neighborhood doesn't mean that he's the only one living in a bubble.

The title's allusion to John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* is a bit awkward, but it accidentally touches on an important irony in understanding modern conservatism. Since at least the nineties, right-wing media has gained a lot of momentum by claiming that conservatism makes them cultural pariahs and bemoans how no one is listening to them. A quick glance through cable news ratings, Congressional seats, and bestseller lists suggests otherwise. This passive-aggressive logic is one of the salient problems with right wing discourse that Stern doesn't notice because he's too busy taking them at face value.

A diversity of political opinion is democratically healthy, but it's not as if conservatism doesn't thrive in bubbles of its own. Plenty of neighborhoods in, say, Texas or Mississippi are redder than rare steak. It begs the question- why are liberals the ones who must leave their bubbles to understand the "real" America? Surely American life is just as real in Brooklyn or San Francisco as it is in Memphis or Omaha. Why does political outreach only go in one direction? If the 2016 election had gone the other way, as it very nearly did, I rather doubt we'd be seeing a national trend of Trump supporters doffing their MAGA hats and getting in touch with their feminine side. Hillary Clinton paid dearly for her basket of deplorable remark, but this was small potatoes compared to what was routinely shouted at Trump rallies, with encouragement coming from behind the podium. In some unconscious way, our political culture has evidently decided that empathy is the exclusive responsibility of the left.

The book flap advertises that along the way Stern "shot a hog in Texas and stood in a pit row at a NASCAR race." His awkward attempts to fit in are amusing, but ultimately going conspicuously native like this amounts to little more than exchanging one arbitrary cultural signifier for another. Especially in our postmodern political world, cultural signifiers are all too often assumed to be the true mark of authenticity. What you eat, what you wear, or what sports you say you enjoy are ways of reassuring others that you're on their team, whether you are actually helping them win or not.

There is a bit of a Victorian-era trope in the premise as well, where the upper classes find rejuvenation from romping among the common folk, a theme that stretches from Tolstoy to *Titanic*. Stern's red state road trip is supposed to teach him how to appreciate a different political perspective, and not just how to enjoy the simple pleasures of country life. The fact that these two narratives are so easily conflated is a telling example of the disingenuous ways in which we frame our political discourse. To be fair, Stern tries to avoid this sentimental pitfall, but it's built in to the project nevertheless.

Describing the vibe at a Trump rally, Stern sees people responding to "a man who knows his audience, an audience that is equally indifferent to the nuances of policy and just wants a champion who will fight their fight, build their wall, and restore America to a time when the white working class was more than a punch line." He cites the "loss of power theory" wherein a social group worries that they are about to lose influence and rallies around someone who promises to maintain it, "even if his words rarely conform to the facts."

Accurate as this may be in some ways, the irony is so glaring that Stern can't see it. If people are voting their wallets out of rage and despair, then it should follow that to them the facts are all-important, and that they need their leadership to get their policy right. But they don't. Stern is sensitive to the anger and alienation felt by many on the right but validating those feelings is dangerous; it doesn't change what they are or convert them into something productive. Without a useful direction, anger- especially of the political variety- only feeds on itself and draws other volatile emotions into the mix. Stern's sympathy for the Trump rally's outrage almost overpowers his attempts to explain it. It's not nice to call people deplorable, but it also doesn't absolve them of it.

To his credit, Stern has done a good deal of research on some very pressing issues. Among other things, he examines gun control, climate change, evangelical Christianity, and even spends some time hanging out with Steve Bannon. He brings a genuine curiosity and good faith to the discussion, making dense subjects

accessible and (almost) fun to read about. He admits that he relies heavily on statistics to support his conclusions, which is fine as far as it goes, but statistics are meaningless without context and are as susceptible to confirmation bias as anything else. The last election proved how misleading thoroughly analyzed polling data can be, and we are now reckoning with the consequences.

Stern wittily refers to the ultraconservative think tank The Heritage Foundation as the “Snidely Whiplash of the think tank world” but consistently uses their data points to justify his arguments. Maybe his time as a CEO makes him accustomed to using statistical analysis as the measure of all things, which is understandable if a little technocratic. Sometimes a data point is just a data point; relying on expertise alone doesn’t always provide useful answers. At times, Stern seems a bit too impressed with arcane knowledge. When the now-disgraced Steve Bannon drops an obscure reference to the Roman Empire that takes Stern by surprise, the explanation doesn’t add to what we already know about Bannon’s apocalyptic worldview.

While visiting an evangelical college, Stern notes the pleasantness of the campus and has a little bit of fun at a creationist museum. Paying to see a replica of Noah’s ark, he wonders aloud how the mighty ship could handle all that hypothetical animal poop and gets an answer. Citing a few more polls, he explains that the latest generation of evangelical youth are much more inclusive on the issue of homosexuality than the likes of Jerry Falwell ever were. For someone like me, who left the church long ago and remembers arguing about gay marriage to the point of tears, this is welcome news. Good to know that the issue is no longer as radioactive as it was back when John Kerry was running for President. More worryingly, he leaves unexamined how a clearly ungodly fellow like Trump overwhelmingly won the evangelical vote.

At times, Stern’s desire to be fair-minded creates unnecessary ambiguity and moral equivalence. Maybe the rate of the ocean’s rise isn’t as fast as some studies suggest but that doesn’t mean warning about the danger of climate change is hysterical. Here as elsewhere, Stern is hasty to criticize “the left” and the Democratic Party interchangeably, but as the last election demonstrated they are by no means the same thing. Driving through Kentucky, Stern ruminates on the desperation of the once-booming coal industry. He acknowledges that this is because of a combination of factors but emphasizes that federal demands to be more environmentally friendly have put miners on the defensive. I’m sure that’s true, but just because mining used to provide a living doesn’t mean we need to return to the brutal and exploitative ways of yesteryear. Stern spends the day riding around with a renewable energy entrepreneur (a fact he briefly mentions) which suggests there might be better ways of putting the unemployed back to work than chasing after clean coal.

Predictably, Stern blames NAFTA for middle America’s economic decline. Whether you like free trade or not, understanding its historical context is crucial. Clinton signed NAFTA because he was a centrist. With the global economy an exciting new concept, the possibilities of free trade and open markets were very much in vogue at the time. Clinton campaigned on being a market-friendly “New Democrat” and diverged from the traditional party line, which was considered by some to be both good policy and a winning political strategy. Add to this Newt Gingrich’s Republicans dominating Congress, and we can see how NAFTA was a product of the very bipartisanship Stern wants to believe in.

The book ends with a heartfelt plea for both parties to embrace the virtues of bipartisanship. Quoting Lincoln’s “we are not enemies, but friends” is an interesting choice, given that Old Abe knew about the inevitability of conflict and the necessity of partisanship on matters of principle. Cooperation is great, but democracy is a two-way street. It’s increasingly clear that bipartisanship in Washington is more of a mirage than an oasis- not that there’s anything inherently wrong with that. As Christopher Hitchens used to say, politics is division by definition. What really matters is the principle behind it.

At this point, the term bipartisan has been used and abused enough times to lose any real meaning. Both

voters and politicians often tell pollsters they want more of it, and then vote the other way come election time. You might recall a Presidential candidate fond of quoting Lincoln in eloquent speeches stressing unity and bipartisanship- and we all know how that turned out. Stern's attempt to cross the ideological divide comes from a good place, but his quixotic attempts to find middle ground only push against the limits of a bubble he tries so hard to escape.

Jeanne says

I pick up a lot of books on sale, often on a whim. I like breaking out of my bubble and hearing someone else's perspective, but Ken Stern's title – *Republican Like Me: A Lifelong Democrat's Journey Across the Aisle* – seemed glib rather than thoughtful, and its cover, with its red MAGA-like cap, reinforced my initial prejudice. I was prepared to dislike this book.

If I had avoided *Republican Like Me* based on my initial prejudices, I would have been wrong. This is a thoughtful exploration of political perspectives from a former CEO of NPR. His title, *Republican Like Me*, appears to be patterned after John Howard Griffin's classic *Black Like Me*, published in 1961. Griffin colored his skin and went undercover to learn what it was like for Blacks in the US. Stern did not go undercover as a Republican, but he did determine to step outside his political bubble and listen to Republicans in a way that most Democrats don't do (and vice versa). Stern went hog hunting and to conservative churches, coal towns, and Trump rallies. He read and listened to right-wing media. He talked to both experts and common people.

A LOOONG time ago I attempted to step outside my bubble by listening to Rush Limbaugh. All that did was raise my blood pressure and ire and reinforce my prejudices – if that's who conservatives are, I concluded, I didn't want to listen. I am particularly impressed, therefore, that Stern was able to spend a year stepping outside his bubble and was willing to hear the truth in what was said. He admits to being changed by his experience – although still self-describes as a liberal.

I have some lovely friends who are Republicans, people with whom I agree more than I disagree, but with whom I had to bite my tongue after the election. And, while Democrats like myself typically describe Republicans using words like “disgusting,” “greedy,” “crazy,” “selfish,” and “bastards” (p. 237 – Stern reports that Republicans describe Democrats with similarly pejorative language – this isn't a fair description of many Republicans. Republicans are more likely, on average, to be generous and volunteer in the community. (This may reflect their religiousness rather than their political bent.)

Who is most representative of Republicans? Limbaugh or my friend? I tend to conclude Limbaugh, when I should conclude it is my friend.

Liberals are generally very interested in diversity and tolerance (racial, ethnic, gender), but much less interested in viewpoint diversity. Shame on us. Recently, a board I am on voted to add a "diversity" position and, in our discussion, down counterarguments about the decision (e.g., about costs, about process), by suggesting that any other viewpoint was a prejudiced one. (One person was told, "Don't be an Old White Man.") A good group, good intentions, but poor process. As Stern observed, *In law school, none of us would have ever been caught dead saying anything against blacks or Hispanics or Jews or gay people, but rubes, southerners, white trash, hillbillies, and Republicans were all fair game. It rankled* (p. 31).

And yet (I kept saying that a lot while reading *Republican Like Me*), and yet, we are more alike than different. Stern quotes Sam Adams, the first openly gay mayor of a US city, who collaborated very

effectively with Kevin Palau, an evangelical religious leader: *"There are things we don't agree on as a liberal Democrat and as an evangelical leader. . . . We can agree to disagree on gay marriage and disagree on abortion but we probably agree on eight out of ten things that are important to society. . . . So we can act together genuinely in our communities on those eight of ten and break out of the trap that has been built around us"* (p. 68).

Stern observed that we are more alike than different politically, but also in our mistakes. Liberals have made indefensible decisions about GMOs, global warming, etc. The world is facing complicated problems and members of both political parties have oversimplified the problems we need to struggle with.

Even if I agreed with President Trump's politics, I hope I would vote against him based on his behavior. How can good people vote for him? Stern noted that evangelicals *willingly vote[d] for Trump because he is a better bet on the issues they care about... [E]vangelicals voted for Trump in the usual proportions, notwithstanding his obvious moral failings, his string of marriages, and his only passing familiarity with the truth. It was for most of them a practical, not a passionate, vote* (p. 87). And, while I would like to say that I would do otherwise if the tables were turned, I'm not so sure that I would.

Republican Like Me was an important book to read – and moreover, a thoughtful and interesting one. I was very glad I stepped outside my comfort zone to read it.

Isaac Bolger says

I find the title to be misleading. I worry that this title furthers a marketing strategy that targets conservatives (and their liberal bubble perception) more than general polarization/bubbles in modern political discourse. This book is about the latter, and is not an indictment of Democrats or Republicans as a whole (although both parties receive their necessary black eyes).

I think he pulls a few too many punches, but it's a worthwhile read on either end of the spectrum, if a bit superficial.

I'd like this to be followed up with a book that focuses more on centrist, pragmatic policy solutions.

Suzie Klein says

I felt this book was disingenuous and I did not appreciate the foul language.

Charles says

"Republican Like Me" belongs to a certain phenotype, which we can call the "anti-jeremiad." Whether on the Left or the Right, people of good will sometimes write a book after discovering what they did not earlier

know about their political opponents. They make those discoveries by exposing themselves to opposing thoughts and attempting to understand the people who hold them. Thus enlightened, they attempt to find common ground, lamenting the polarization of today's American society. Probably because the educated Right necessarily is necessarily continuously exposed to the thought of the educated Left, and not vice versa, such anti-jeremiads can mostly be found by authors from the Left. A classic of the genre is Arlie Hochschild's "Strangers in Their Own Land," which largely parallels Ken Stern's book, although Hochschild offers more focus on the personal likeability of her political opponents, and Stern's voyage of discovery offers more focus on the plausibility of their arguments. There is always room for another, though, and this genre has rarely been as well done or as timely as in this book, written by a man who was, about ten years ago, the CEO of National Public Radio.

Although I am the mirror image of Stern, on the Right when he is on the Left, I can find very little to disagree with in this book, either in its facts or analysis. Sure, I might quibble here and there, and Stern doesn't cover every issue dividing America, but he hits all the main issues without flinching. This book was just released, by a major publisher with a major author, and I am quite interested to see the public reaction. So far, it has been ignored by the Left—it has received no reviews in any major newspaper or magazine, although it has gotten some mentions in the conservative press. My guess is that it will continue to be ignored, which is a shame. If it is addressed by the mainstream media, I expect it will be attacked without addressing his points—my prediction is that Stern will be attacked as a crypto-conservative. After all, the usual mode of political discourse today is "those who are not with us are against us," and any leftist who, like Stern, in an discussion of the moderate view of abortion rights most Americans hold, asks when a woman should be allowed to abort her "child" has not grasped the real disposition of today's Left. For that matter, as anyone reading the comments section of "The New York Times" can tell you, in the view of most of the Left, anyone who admits any truth in conservative views is, if not the Antichrist, at least his catamite, and I expect that to be how Stern will be viewed, if his all-access pass to said comments section has not already been revoked.

Trump receives nods throughout the book, as must be true of any book on current politics, but he is not the focus, nor are his supporters. Neither are we treated to mindless memes about fake news or the Russians. This alone is refreshing. Instead, Stern divides the book into different topical areas to examine our divisions. He immerses himself in turn into gun culture, evangelical Christians, the white working class and their maladies, environmentalism and science, anti-poverty programs, and modern media. He spent a year traveling around in flyover country, as well as in his own backyard, and the reader can tell he had to boil down a lot of material, not puff up a little. Unlike a lot of similar books, this does not smack of a padded-out magazine article. Stern's writing has no wasted words, and is direct, to the point, and never evasive. Only a reader determined to resist all aspects of his message would complain about the way he has chosen to write the book. And not only is the writing crisp, it's funny without stretching. "The first known instance of fracking occurred in 1947 when Floyd Farris [used] 1,000 gallons of gasoline thickened with napalm to crack open a limestone formation—a horrible-sounding idea presumably first reported by the Widow Farris." Or, "If LBJ descended back down to earth, if that is the right direction"

Stern begins by describing his own neighborhood, Hobart Street in Mount Pleasant (in Washington, D.C.). It sounds like a great place to live, with substantial community spirit, interesting people and the various amenities that characterize Capital City (though not the rest of Panem, which directly or indirectly pays the salaries that make this lifestyle possible). As Stern discovers, somewhat to his horror (how this could have escaped him before is unclear, but I guess that's the point), it's also profoundly intolerant and monocultural, chock full of people, including him, whose only thought about Republicans or conservatives is to "fear and dislike them." As Stern points out, this is increasingly the default mode of any given location in America—antipathy to those of opposing political views. (He does not point out, though, that it's primarily

the locations of the rich and powerful that hate conservatives, and the locations of the poor and powerless that hate liberals, which is an important distinction for America, though not directly relevant for his thesis.) But, as Stern also points out, gaps in our views on actual policies haven't, for the most part, widened—so for the most part “polarization is increasing because polarization is increasingly easy.” What's not easy, therefore, is pushing against polarization, so that is what Stern decided to do, “set out to look at issues from a conservative perspective.”

Stern chooses his beginning wisely, with guns, which are in many ways emblematic of the invincibly ignorant closed-mindedness that caused him so much concern about his tribe. He goes to Texas to shoot pigs; he goes to a Virginia gun show; he studies gun statistics in detail. He even has his basic facts right, for example correctly distinguishing shotguns and rifles, which seems like a trivial thing, but even such basic knowledge is almost always missing in liberal discussions about guns. I expect he picked this issue to lead with because it's the easiest one to prove his point with, since literally everything the Left thinks about guns is either demonstrably totally false, or malicious, or both. Stern concludes as much, without using those words. He says, “I have long had settled views on gun control, despite the fact that I had only the sketchiest knowledge about guns, gun statistics, and the science of violence crimes.” Those words accurately characterize 99.99% of those who actively push additional gun control. To nobody's surprise, or at least not to mine, Stern finds that everything he thought was wrong.

Thus, gun homicides are actually low and dropping, both by rate and absolutely (especially with rifles, and especially with assault rifles). Children are not widely endangered; far more children drown in bathtubs than are killed by guns. Past gun control had no impact and future gun control would have less. Gun control did not change homicide rates in England or elsewhere. It's not that Stern buys into the idea that guns are necessary for self-defense against the government, and he thinks the evidence is mixed as to their use for self-defense against criminals. It's that he doesn't think people who believe those things are the problem, or any problem at all—because they obviously aren't, once you study the issue. Therefore, “if we really want to reduce gun violence, we should be focusing not first upon the weapons but on a lot of things around it: poverty, drugs, race, addressing mental illness, opportunity, and gangs, to name just a few.” He comes to conclusions that are 180 degrees from his original untutored beliefs because there is no other possible way to believe for an honest person; beliefs other than these are the equivalent of the belief in a flat earth (though the same is not true for the other issues Stern discusses, which as I say is probably why he began here).

On the other hand, Stern doesn't sugarcoat the ragged edges of gun culture. He sees the quirkiness in pig hunting; he notes the conspiracy theorists, who are legion among gun proponents; and he is not blind to the dubious characters that show up at, and sell at, gun shows. I, for example, have repeatedly seen a few overtly racist signs and stickers being sold by official vendors at Indianapolis gun shows, and Stern saw similar things in Virginia. But he openly admits what is undeniable, though you wouldn't know it from the NYT comments section, “Like it or not, and many probably won't, the real people's movement around guns lies with the NRA, not with gun control advocates.” He also notes that due to liberal gun control policies in the few areas they still control, most big cities, “The one and only group that has a hard time obtaining firearms in this country is the law-abiding [urban] poor.” That is, gun control is racist in effect (and racist in its history, though he doesn't discuss that). So, while he doesn't say it explicitly, his conclusion isn't just that the Left should understand the Right on guns, it's that the Right is 95% correct on the issue, or more.

Next Stern discusses evangelical Christians. He attends nondenominational megachurches; he attends churches of the Assembly of God (Pentecostal, and pretty much the Protestant antithesis of megachurch). Here he is a little bit less successful understanding, probably because religion and religious belief is a lot more complex than guns, but he still does a good job. There is a little too much flavor of believing evangelicals are great when they work with, for example, the mayor of Portland to give massive help to poor

communities, but only if they are strictly forbidden from, you know, evangelizing. In this vision, “building bridges” means churchgoers backfilling the total failure of the local Democratic machine and non-churchgoers to do anything for the worst-off communities, with a nod to the fact that most charity in the United States is religious in origin. And there is a much too strong flavor of Christians are only OK so long as they embrace the latest moral crusades of the Left, such as gay rights, as various trendy and weak evangelicals have been doing in a quisling bid to gain acceptance from the wider world (e.g., Jen Hatmaker). But really, Stern does an overall good job trying to understand the evangelical perspective, even when visiting the “Creation Museum.” I suppose Stern’s only real failure here is not noting that evangelical Christians are only a part of Christian belief, but given that they’re a major part, and politically active and important on the Right, focusing on them seems entirely reasonable. So far, so not that exceptional as to evangelicals. But Stern then again, as with guns, says that in large measure the Left has been wrong and that evangelicals were right—“the predictions they [e.g., Jerry Falwell] made about the collapse of the American family have proven to be at least partially right, with enormous negative consequences for society.” He adduces the usual (and accurate) litany of horrors, including the terrible outcomes for children raised in single-parent families (although he bizarrely presumes to instruct us that Jesus only forbade divorce “because of the economic consequences of divorce”). Thus, his conclusions seem to be less just “I now understand evangelicals” and more “socially, they’re largely correct.”

In the next chapter “Basket of Deplorables,” Trump gets the most coverage, being ignored in most of the rest of the book. Among other outreach, Stern attends a Trump rally in Virginia and talks to a variety of Trump supporters. Here he uses what I think is the best word ever to describe Trump’s approach to the world: “vainglory.” I’m going to use that too. Anyway, here Stern covers recently well-trodden ground also seen in books like “Hillbilly Elegy,” noting the decline of the white working class, not just economically but also in terms of addiction, suicide, massively increased premature death rates, and their entirely legitimate beefs against not only the Davoisie they blame for many of their problems, as well as the professional-management elite that holds them in contempt, but against well-heeled urban conservatives (Jeb!) and libertarians who think they should either move to where there’s economic opportunity or shut up and die, their choice.

This chapter segues neatly into, and intertwines with, the next chapter’s discussion of coal mining and global warming, where Stern, quoting Hayek, claims that conservatives frequently reject scientific evidence: “the fatal flaw in the conservative mindset is to ignore or dispute inconvenient facts.” With some justice, Stern cites global warming as one of those facts (although he suggests no others, and I can’t think of any—this book, certainly, only shows ignoring or disputing facts by the Left). On the other hand, on climate, Stern notes that Democrats frequently exaggerate that science and, more importantly, imagine it dictates a particular policy outcome, and, even more importantly, grossly exaggerate the immediate and long-term dangers, which Stern does not hesitate to call “alarmism.” Citing a Yale study, Stern notes that in eighty years, “the cost of climate change [is estimated to] ‘represent the difference between the world being 6.5 times wealthier than in 2015 or 6.7 times wealthier.’ ” Meanwhile, the same people starved by Capital City in the previous chapter are further starved by Obama’s promise to “bankrupt” all the coal companies that offer the only jobs in town, in order to address the threat of global warming, and anyway the owners of all those companies have always been absentee landlords who take the wealth to the big towns. “I always thought it was the Democrats who were supposed to stand up for people without power, but it sure doesn’t look that way from Pikeville [Kentucky]. If there were a place where I started thinking the title of this book should be ‘Independent Like Me,’ that place would be Pikeville.”

And this chapter segues nicely into the next, on science more broadly (this is actually where Stern visits the “Creation Museum”). He points out that young Earth creationism is believed in by 52 percent of Republicans. And by 33 percent of Democrats. Even more heretically, he notes that while creationism is scientific bunk, it has no deleterious consequences on broader society, unlike scientific bunk beloved by

liberals, such as the belief that GMO food has any dangers at all, which belief starves people to death, or the belief fracking causes environmental harm (something he points out even Obama's notoriously politicized EPA rejected), the banning of which would only harm the poor and hugely increase carbon dioxide emissions.

Finally, Stern covers poverty, in essence admitting that conservatives were right when they wanted to tie welfare to work, and that the War on Poverty's \$22 trillion spend has been a failure. Not that conservative panaceas are the answer, whether block grants (susceptible to government incompetence which is just as prevalent on the local as the federal levels) or tax cutting (citing Sam Brownback's recent dismal failure in Kansas, which I don't know a ton about but strikes me as a powerful indictment of Heritage Foundation orthodoxy). Here, Stern seems to be reaching toward the idea that those who today run the Republican Party are selling what nobody is buying—a keen truth, as can be seen by the mewling flailing this week of Jeff Flake, who loathes the vainglorious Trump yet can only offer emasculated zombie Reaganism to those masses left out of the American Dream. The deeper you dig, the more Stern seems to be coming around to an educated, sophisticated form of Trumpism without Trump—not orthodox Chamber of Commerce Republicanism, not social conservatism, but not orthodox Democratic policy either, or social liberalism.

Coming full circle to his theme of division, Stern examines the media, admitting that the mainstream media is liberal. He does claim that when he was at NPR everyone bent over backward to be fair, which any casual listen to any politically oriented issue covered by NPR over the past twenty years would disprove immediately—and which statement he immediately undermines by saying that as NPR CEO, “From time to time I would urge the NPR newsroom, which was deeply interested in fostering gender and racial diversity, to add political and geographic diversity to the agenda as well. No one ever disagreed with that notion, but no one ever did anything, either.” He half endorses, or at least doesn't outright reject, Andrew Breitbart's view of leftist domination of “schools, newspapers, network news, art, music, film, and television” as “the Complex,” which “controlled the very information and ideas available to society.” But he (correctly) views Breitbart as a major progenitor of today's media nastiness, and draws a strongly unfavorable personal picture of James O'Keefe, famous for his “sting” videos of various leftist wrongdoing. Given Stern's fairness, I'm sure his picture is accurate as to O'Keefe's personality—one of the tragedies of increasing polarization on the Right is the easy acceptance of dubious personalities and bad character. In fairness, such characters have always been accepted on the Left, hewing to the ancient doctrine of “no enemies on the Left,” such that they are still supported to do their dirty work, even if sometimes not admitted to Upper East Side salons. I bet you can't name me a single figure ever expelled from the Left as too radical (nice to see you today, Bill Ayers!) while I can reel off twenty or thirty conservatives expelled from the Right. Stern also interviews Steve Bannon and discusses the Gracchi, to whom Bannon introduced him; two brothers who were murdered populists of the late Roman Republic, who Stern sees as possibly relevant to today, which I agree with (although, not to cavil, but Stern incorrectly calls their followers, not the brothers, the “Gracchi,” and says it's they were prominent in “middle epoch of the Roman Empire” in 133 B.C., which is just wrong on every level—what happened to editors who know any history?).

Naturally enough, Stern closes with complaints about the demonization of political opponents—but, perhaps inadvertently, only cites liberal demonization of conservatives, giving a variety of hair-raising examples (several tied to the comments section of the NYT). But he doesn't end there—he cites social science research not only on how easily we divide into “us” and “them” on the most trivial of grounds, but also how, with just a little exposure to what others think and why, we can coalesce again. He channels (and cites) Yuval Levin on our commonalities outweighing our divisions, and sums up his book by saying “it is about the belief that no one has a monopoly on wisdom and that we would all be far better off doing a little less finger-pointing and a little more listening to the other side.” Certainly this is true, although it glosses over various other problems, such as rise of aggressive emotivism as a substitute for reasoning, leading to a much lower level of

quality of discourse than in prior periods of intense division.

Whether or not Stern's book will accomplish his purpose, I can't tell. But it certainly can't hurt. People on the Right, especially Breitbart types, should read this so they understand that many on the Left are good people trying to build bridges, not the caricatures fed to them by the websites they choose to frequent. People on the Left should read this to understand much the same thing, as well as to re-evaluate their position on issues they may not have truly examined. I certainly hope that this book gets traction; America will be better for it.

Kim Volk says

Interesting read, especially theses days, Author was president of NPR and lived in a blue bubble in DC in a neighborhood who agreed Republicans weren't welcome there. After he left NPR and concerned about the deep partisanship in his neighborhood and the country - he took some time to spend with the other side and try to understand their perspective on a variety of issues. He came away with a healthy respect for the differences of opinion - in some cases he changed his mind and in others he reaffirmed his prior views. Bottom line - he is no longer a registered Democrat but he is also not a Republican (contrary to the book's title). He is a registered independent. The book also uses some studies to confirm that the middle is where most Americans are despite the media coverage of the crazies on both sides.

Pearl says

I have been getting sick and tired of the polarization in this country, then heard about this book and got it from the library. Loved it. He makes some spot on points about the divide we have, why he thinks this is so- and what an individual can do to get out of this mindset of us vs. them and us has the truth and them are just idiots and dolts.

I don't want to go on with this feeling toward my fellow human beings with opposing views to mine. He's not Republican- it's a play on "Black Like Me" that came out in 1961 that I read in my teen years (I'm almost a retiree now.)

He writes about his experiences, thoughts- spending a year traveling to conservative functions, experiences, meeting and getting to know people in coal towns and left behind manufacturing towns etc. and research on the issues and statistics on various hot button issues- trying to learn about the opposite point of view and why. I thought this was great I really don't want to live in a bubble where my only contacts are people like me.

Ryan says

This book, and the author's insight, is much needed right now. I thought it was a great read.

Ken Stern, the former CEO of NPR, and a born & bred Washington DC Liberal, decided to spend a year trying to understand the Right. This involved not just simple interviews, but actually going to red states and cities and spending time with individuals. He went pig hunting and attended evangelical churches. He got to know the people behind the label. What he found was that his assumptions about who these people were and what they stand for were simply wrong.

Stern tackles the classic conflict points between Liberals and Conservatives: guns, climate change, immigration... I think he successfully brings to light the conversation we should be having. He avoids the straw men and addresses the issues as both sides see it, from each's point of view. He does this honestly and points out, where appropriate, where one side might be full of crap. But if one side is full of crap (Conservatives denying climate change) he points to where the other side is equally guilty (Liberals' fear of GMOs).

While the mainstream media, alternative media, and social media all paint one side of the political spectrum as crazy and the other as sane (contributing to further divisions in our society), Ken Stern saw that we all have much more in common than we have differences. He has a catchy line in the book where he states (in his meeting and working with Conservatives) that he'll ignore the two points on which they disagree, and focus on the eight in which they are in agreement.

Even on the two points where many Liberals & Conservatives disagree: guns and abortion, things are not black and white. There is a spectrum of opinions. Conservatives tend to inhabit one side of the spectrum, while Liberals tend to inhabit the other side, but there is so much overlap and nuance. However, we wouldn't know that from the rhetoric we hear from politicians and the media. According to them, those who are not a part of the in-group are just stupid, clueless people.

The false dichotomy of Conservative/Liberal, along with the partisan nature of media (both mainstream- and social-) is only driving Americans further apart, without anyone realizing that there is so much we agree on. I think this book is a great read to remind us all that we are so much alike, and most of us want the same thing: the improvement of life for all in our country.

Thomas De Ceglie says

One of the most important books I read this year. No one--not liberals, not conservatives--has a monopoly on wisdom; we would be far better off doing less finger-pointing and more listening to "the other side." As Abraham Lincoln said, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

Read this book before engaging in any more political discourse. Please.

John Devlin says

Probably more required reading for Leftists than Conservative. Since, Stern, a dyed in the wool Democrat, ends up coming around to a more conservative bent by the book's end - minus the Creationism.

He's a fair minded guy in most respects and he's got a good sense of humor and knows the use of a elegant profanity now and again that elicited a few belly laughs from me - not an easy feat.

The book is well sourced, especially for its length, and by the end Stern seems a good guy to have a beer with - an important element whenever one is reading a personal monologue like this.

