

CBS Mornings

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7:06:54 a.m. [TEASE]

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GAYLE KING: In our next half hour we'll talk about the rise in violent political rhetoric with John Dickerson and former Republican official Doug Heye.

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7:30:26 a.m.

6 minutes and 18 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Dangers of Divisive Politics; John Dickerson & Doug Heye on Rise in Threats Against Lawmakers]

NATE BURLESON: The shocking attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, inside their California home comes amid growing threats and violent rhetoric against political opponents and public officials. According to the U.S. Capitol police in 2021, there were more than 9,600 threats against lawmakers. That's more than double the number from 2017 when there were just under 4,000. We're joined now by Doug Heye, former communications director of the Republican National Committee and our chief political analyst John Dickerson. Good morning, how you fellas doing?

DOUG HEYE: Good morning.

JOHN DICKERSON: Doing alright.

BURLESON: John, let's just cut right to it. How did we get to this point?

DICKERSON: Well, we'll be here until dinner if I go through everything that we get there. So, there are broad forces in politics and then what's happening in the two parties because it's not the same in both parties. But broadly, what's happening in politics is the increase in apocalyptic thinking, which means that if I lose the fight, all is lost.

BURLESON: Mmm.

DICKERSON: You have a situation also where you have a rise in negative partisanship, so the other person in the other party is not just wrong, they're evil.

BURLESON: Mmm.

DICKERSON: And these are the structures of politics that have been exacerbated by the media, by the heightened partisanship, the fact that we all live near people like us, not near people unlike us, so we only hang out with people who talk like we do.

BURLESON: Yeah.

DICKERSON: Gerrymandering which has exacerbated that. The media, which lives off of conflict. Fundraising requires lots of conflict. You don't get a fundraising email saying, "oh the other side has a point." You get an email that says the other is at the door and ready to ruin your life and all that you believe.

BURLESON: Right.

DICKERSON: That has amped up the temperature.

BURLESON: Stoking the flames, if you will.

DICKERSON: Stoking the flames. There's always been political violence, but now what happens is you have a system that structurally incentivizing more and more heated rhetoric and then you have the difference in the two parties. While there have been victims in both parties, targeted Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, the structure of the Republican Party more recently with the advent of Donald Trump has put someone at the top of the party who has consistently advocated violence and who has created a market within his own party where it's fun to joke about violence —

KING: Yep.

DICKERSON: — to play footsie with the forces of violence. And then you have this situation where you have Republican lawmakers when they were retiring would say I don't want to speak out even though I'm retiring because if I go back home, I'm going to get threats, and — and this is — is related to Paul Pelosi, but also the most important thing is, in January 6th, you had a situation where lies from the President created a violent reaction by people who thought I can't get what I want through the ballot box, so I'm going to turn to violence.

KING: But they continue to do so, Doug. And I know you don't speak for all Republicans. But now, this feels different to me. Does it feel different to you? We've been hearing about violence that's going to happen. It's going to happen and now it has happened. And it doesn't seem to me that a lot of Republicans have been full throated in their — in their condemnations of it —

HEYE: No, they haven't.

KING: — when it first happened.

HEYE: No, they haven't, and some make light of it. And the challenge, I think, that we have in politics is it's bad when it happens to our side, it's okay when it happens to the other side.

KING: But it shouldn't be a Republican or Democrat issue.

HEYE: No, no, it shouldn't.

KING: Everybody should be saying this.

HEYE: And every member — every Republican member of Congress believes Steve Scalise and knows the security detail that was fired upon that day of the baseball practice and other members of Congress who were — who were shot at. But we have very short memories and when it happens to the other side, we sort of move past it.

BURLESON: Right.

HEYE: The problem for these members of Congress is every single one of them is fearful of the threats that they all get. 435 members of Congress, 100 senators, every one of them is getting death threats and really vile — not your garden variety kind of death threats.

BURLESON: Right.

HEYE: Really vile things coming every day that are far removed from the tough talk that we have in our politics and should have in our politics.

DICKERSON: That's a really important point. Politics has always been tough, but it's often been tough in the service of an idea. Now because of this negative partisanship, the idea that the other person is bad no matter what we're talking about, that's what changes into this new territory from tough talk to creating a situation where it's fun to make fun of them. It's fun to talk about violence with them, and that just raises the temperature.

BURLESON: Yeah.

TONY DOKOUPIL: But does the negative partisanship happen because it works? That's why candidates do it? And if that's the case, how do you convince a candidate not to do a thing that works? How do you lower the temperature?

HEYE: Yep. Negative ads have always worked. They're always going to work. But there's a difference between — so you know, in 2010, I helped create the Fire Pelosi movement, which was very successful for Republicans.

KING: Do you regret that now? I thought Margaret did a good job in challenging Emmer yesterday by saying do you have to use a gun in the ad.

HEYE: I think there's a difference when you start using things like that, guns in ads.

BURLESON: Right.

HEYE: Because this guy in San Francisco is, you know, obviously a smorgasbord of nutjob, right?

BURLESON: Right.

HEYE: The problem — and, look, here's the bad [news](#): None of these attacks have been successful. But one of them is going to be. And we've been lucky that Gabby Giffords is still alive. We're lucky that Steve Scalise is still alive. Lee Zeldin.

BURLESON: Right.

HEYE: Somebody's going to be successful and that's where we get to the point of real unraveling in our country.

DICKERSON: Structurally, the attacks work, and there is no market for let's not have an attack.

KING: Yeah.

DICKERSON: There used to be a situation where in politics somebody would rush into the moment and show excessive empathy for the person who was hurt because they thought this might help me.

BURLESON: Right, right.

DICKERSON: There's not a lot of that going on.

KING: So, we can sit here and wring our hands how bad this is, we all know it's bad, and then nothing changes.

BURLESON: Right.

KING: What do you realistically think it takes to change?

DOKOUPIL: And what can a person watching this do in their own life —

KING: Exactly.

DOKOUPIL: — to make a difference?

DICKERSON: Well, the people ask stop incentivizing those who play and joke-y and have fun with the idea of violence.

KING: Call them out on.

DICKERSON: They can stop thinking about the other side as apocalyp — as — as — apocalyp — as apocalyptic threats to the nature of the free world. We are complicated people and not — the other person is not evil. And — and they can call out lawmakers who — who make a career out of this and say I don't want any part of that.

KING: And they're already —

BURELSON: Stop — stop perpetuating that divisiveness —

DOKOUPIL: Yeah, yeah.

BURLESON: — that is out there across all of these platforms that we all use on a daily basis.

DOKOUPIL: Yeah.

KING: There's already conspiracy theories. Elon Misk — Elon Musk re-tweeted —

DOKOUPIL: Yeah.

KING: — a conspiracy theory —

DOKOUPIL: Yeah.

KING: — that Pelosi and this guy knew each other. Absolutely no truth to that whatsoever.

DICKERSON: By a source —

KING: What impact does that have?

DICKERSON: — by a source that previously said Hillary Clinton had died.

BURLESON: Yeah.

DICKERSON: And that's not a free speech thing.

BURLESON: Yeah.

DICKERSON: That's a human thing.

BURLESON: Right.

DICKERSON: A man is in a hospital with a fractured skull, and you're playing light with what's happening to a man in pain.

BURLESON: A human being.

DOKOUPIL: And, as John said, we could talk about this until dinner. But we are going to do a piece in the next block about ideas. And we want to get to it. These ideas — appreciate it, both of you, John Dickerson, Doug Heye. Good talking with you.

KING: Tony saying, move along.

DICKERSON: I've been in that seat many times.