

THE CONVERSATION

There Are Some Things We Are Grateful for and Some We Are ... Not

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**By Gail Collins and Bret Stephens**

Ms. Collins and Mr. Stephens are opinion columnists. They converse every week.

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Bret Stephens: Gail, I hope you had a lovely and restful Thanksgiving weekend. At the risk of turning the meaning of the holiday on its head, I wanted to ask you what you *don't* feel grateful for, at least politically speaking.

Gail Collins: Well, before we go there, let me start by saying I am very grateful I didn't have a dinner date at Mar-a-Lago. Which I guess goes without saying. But gee, Donald Trump broke bread with Kanye West and Nick Fuentes, who is both a Holocaust denier and a white supremacist? Good Lord.

Bret: What's shocking is that people are shocked. Still, it's pretty nauseating to me that the Republican Jewish Coalition — whose unofficial motto should be "Hit me, baby, one more time" — could not bring itself to condemn the former president by name.

For my part, I'm emphatically not grateful to live in a country where there was a mass shooting last week at a Walmart in Virginia, which was preceded by a mass shooting at a gay club in Colorado, which was preceded by a mass shooting at the University of Virginia, which occurred the same weekend that four students at the University of Idaho were stabbed to death, which came just a few days after four people were shot dead in a home in Maryland. And I'm just scratching the surface here.

Gail: The Idaho tragedy expands the story beyond shootings, and I hope you've got thoughts on the nation's overall pathology about violence.

Bret: I know the research hasn't proved this, but I suspect violent video games also have a lot to do with both socially isolating and numbing the minds of troubled teenage boys. If I ever get to be king of a small island, I'd probably ban them all — except, of course, Pac-Man and Donkey Kong.

Gail: OK, am loving the idea of you as an anti-game crusader.

But the bottom line in the vast majority of these terrible tragedies is guns. Easy access to firearms turns everyday psychopaths into mass murderers, and I can't understand why the nation doesn't rise up in outrage.

People are talking about using red flag laws to report gun owners who might be dangerous, but I just don't buy that as an answer. The stories we hear after these tragedies suggest most of them involve shooters whose families would never pursue such an effortful, seeking-outside-help approach.

Bret: We're in total accord. Any sane society would raise the legal age to buy guns to at least 21, even 25, limit magazine sizes, impose draconian penalties on illegal weapons traffic and possession and restore stop-question-frisk as a legitimate police tactic so long as it isn't used in a racially discriminatory manner.

Gail: Well, we've finally coasted to a disagreement there at the end. Try convincing law-abiding young Black men that if the police are encouraged to stop and frisk, they won't misuse the go-ahead.

But please, let's get back to guns.

Bret: I'm reminded of Justice Robert Jackson's line about how the Bill of Rights shouldn't be turned into a suicide pact. We need to bring that idea back to life when it comes to the Second Amendment.

Gail: President Biden just called for a ban on assault weapons, but it's not gonna happen. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, the leader on this issue, says he doesn't have the votes now, and it sure isn't going to pass once Kevin McCarthy takes over.

Bret: Democrats and moderate Republicans need to get smarter about the gun debate. Calling for blanket bans just won't work in this political climate. But I bet most Americans can be won over to the idea that if you can't buy a beer, you shouldn't be able to buy a gun. Not that it will sway House Republicans this term, but I'm thinking longer term.

Gail: We'll see. But to digress, tell me who you're rooting for on the political front now.

Bret: You mean Congress? Well, let me start by rooting for Herschel Walker's defeat in Georgia's runoff election. And I say that as someone who isn't exactly sympathetic to his opponent.

Gail: Yeah, Walker's accidental announcement on Fox that "this election is about the people" was certainly a comment that launched a thousand memes.

And, of course, a reminder of why he's such a disaster as a candidate.

Bret: If his entire campaign has made one thing clear, it is that we would all be better off if he were to lose.

As for the House, the most I can hope for is that they do as little harm as possible. Couldn't the 118th Congress just take a very long nap?

Gail: Well, they certainly have stuff to do. Like, um, keeping the government in operation. Which would require raising the debt limit.

Could be tricky even with the current competent Democratic leadership. Are you on board?

Bret: Yes. I'm all for curbing government spending, but the debt limit is the dumbest way to achieve it. It's like trying to keep an alcoholic sober by locking up his liquor stash in a glass box.

Gail: We're certainly in the holiday spirit. Love your analogy.

Bret: I also think Congress can do some good if it pushes the administration to give Ukraine the kinds of arms it needs to defeat Russia, and Taiwan the weapons it needs to deter China. That's why I'm glad Mike Rogers of Alabama will be head of the Armed Services Committee and Michael McCaul of Texas will be head of Foreign Affairs. They're serious men.

Gail: Well, as you know, I try not to talk about foreign affairs ...

Bret: On the other hand, having Ohio's Jim Jordan as head of the Judiciary Committee is about as enticing as a pimple-popping video on YouTube: You'll watch in horrified fascination, and then you'll want to throw up.

Gail: Ha! Happy to just say: Your party.

Bret: Not any longer.

Speaking of Congress, Gail, any thoughts on Representative Hakeem Jeffries of New York as House minority leader?

Gail: First, I should say again how great it was that Nancy Pelosi was ready to let some new folks have a turn in charge.

And Jeffries seems like a fine pick. Well past time for a Black member of the House to take the top job for the Democrats, and in Jeffries you have a congressman with a long track record of progressive leadership combined with the skill to go moderate when the need arises.

You have any thoughts? And how would you compare him with McCarthy on the Republican side?

Bret: Jeffries was impressive as one of the House managers in Trump's first impeachment trial. And he's pro-Israel, which is a relief, given the anti-Israel drift of some of his more progressive colleagues. I would probably disagree with him on most issues, but he seems like a good choice. And as for any comparison with McCarthy: I generally prefer vertebrates to invertebrates.

Gail: Hehehehe.

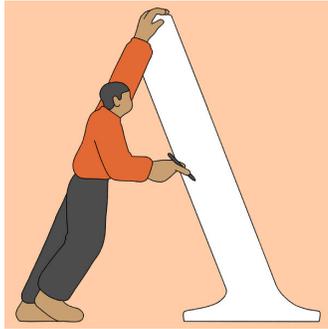
Bret: Gail, can I switch to something a bit more positive? In the spirit of the season, our bosses have asked us to suggest some charities we think are especially worthy of support. Last year I endorsed the Hunts Point Alliance for Children, which provides educational opportunities for kids in one of New York's most impoverished neighborhoods; Compass to Care, which helps defray the transportation costs of families with children who have cancer; and Minds Matter, which does amazing work helping gifted kids from underprivileged homes prepare academically for college.

I continue to admire all of these organizations. This year I'll add another: the Rising Seas Institute, which organized the trip I took last summer to Greenland and helped reorient my thinking about climate change. Its leader, John Englander, is one of the most thoughtful and gracious people I've ever met — even if we still disagree about a thing or three.

What about you?

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LYDIA POLGREEN
Protect Our Democracy. Support Local News.



NICHOLAS KR
Help Children and Grow

Gail: Kudos to the Rising Seas Institute for your environmental evolution. Among its many other achievements, it'll now be known as the group that got Bret Stephens worried about global warming.

For my own list, I've tried to spread out a bit this year. Let's start down in rural Mexico, where La Mision Children's Fund offers resources — including a food bank and educational assistance — to help combat the hunger, extreme poverty and limited access to basic human necessities experienced by the children and families of Baja, Mexico.

Bret: You know I grew up in Mexico City, so I love this suggestion.

Gail: Very much closer to home, there's United Community Centers in Brooklyn. U.C.C. has been on the job, working with hard-pressed, low-income families for ages, but lately it has taken on additional responsibilities for the growing immigrant population in East New York. One of its many projects is urban agriculture and what's possibly the country's largest youth-run farmers' market.

Bret: All of us who've made it in America should treat new arrivals as if they were the younger incarnations of ourselves or our own humble forebears, worthy of all the support and respect we can give them.

Gail: Finally, I reached out to my Cincinnati roots for a recommendation and got Voices for Healthy Kids, which is working on everything from expanding early childhood programs to making streets safer for biking and sidewalks safer for walking.

Bret: Now we just need to start an organization dedicated to all of us who put on four or five pounds last week. Can Peloton reinvent itself as a charity?

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