Why Good People Get Caught Up in High Conflict

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Garrett Graff, promotional message, Tricia Johnson, Amanda Ripley

promotional message 00:00

How does race and racism feel in the body? Esther Armah believes that changing the brutal realities of systemic racism requires embarking on a mission of emotional justice, which can be messy and uncomfortable. She’s featured in the new podcast Solvers created by the Skoll Foundation in partnership with Aspen Ideas. Hear about her journey to create the Armah Institute of Emotional Justice, which uses the emotional power of theatre, art and storytelling to center experiences of marginalized people. It upends performative diversity, equity and inclusion trainings. Subscribe to Solvers to hear from Armah and other social entrepreneurs who are working to better the world in their communities. Find Solvers on your favorite podcast player.

Tricia Johnson 00:52

This is Aspen Ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I’m Tricia Johnson. In this age of deep polarization, it’s not just politicians at each other’s throats, it’s everyday Americans. These familiar us versus them feuds have a name. It’s called high conflict and actually began in the 1980s says journalist Amanda Ripley. In the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, Americans began to distrust institutions, then news organizations and social media exacerbated this damaging discord.
Amanda Ripley  01:24
So we've designed a lot of our institutions to incentivize high conflict. And the important thing about that is we designed them, they're not from God, so we can design them to incentivize good conflict.

Tricia Johnson  01:38
Today, Ripley talks about her book, High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn book series. Four years ago, Amanda Ripley noticed something going on in the country she couldn't quite understand. The type of conflict permeating America was the intractable kind where normal rules of engagement didn't apply. She decided to dive into learning all about conflict.

Amanda Ripley  02:07
I spend a lot of time with people who study conflict of all kinds: personal, political, professional, at scale, individual. And the study of conflict as a system, particularly intractable conflict, for me, really clicked everything else into place.

Tricia Johnson  02:25
When we're engaged in high conflict, our brains behave differently, we feel increasingly certain about our own superiority, and more and more mystified by the other side. Ripley says good people can get captured by high conflict, but they can also break free. In a conversation with Garrett Graff, Ripley, who's an investigative journalist and best selling author, explains how to return to good conflict. It's the kind of conflict that pushes people to become better. Graff is the director for cyber initiatives for the Aspen Digital program at the Aspen Institute. Here's Graff.

Garrett Graff  02:57
Amanda, it's a pleasure to get the chance to talk with you about what is a fascinating book exploring what I think you call the invisible hand of our time. But when I was reading it, it almost seemed more like the background music of our daily lives. And that is, this challenge of what you label high conflict, basically, as is you define it distinct from good conflict or a sort of natural conflict, but the type of conflict that resolves into a true us versus them. So I want to spend a little bit of time talking with you today about that,
dive a little bit into some of the markers and the investigative work that you did to bring this book and this concept forward. But thought I would just start by asking you to talk a little bit about what got you interested in this particular topic? In some ways, what I found sort of so fascinating about reading it was that it is in so many ways, what we are living through in so many stories in our daily life right now, but thought about in a way that most of us never stopped to actually think of and process as these daily news stories unfold.

Amanda Ripley 04:29
I'm so glad to be back with you all, talking about this. Watergate feels like an appropriate backstory. We can get back to that. Yeah, I mean, four years ago, I just felt like as a journalist, I had to do something differently. I felt like it was so easy as a journalist to just make our political conflicts worse. Even if you didn't intend to. Some people intend to, but most don't. And yet here we were, and it just felt like there was something I wasn't understanding about what was going going on in the country. And that's that's a problem, right? So I spent a lot of time with people who study conflict of all kinds personal political professional, at scale individual. And the study of conflict as a system, particularly intractable conflict, for me really clicked everything else into place. There's a lot of forces that got us where we are. But that as a sort of overlay, suddenly made everything make sense in a distorted kind of way. So then the question became, alright, what can we learn from people who have been through really ugly conflict and gotten to a better place? So I followed a handful of people, including a politician in California, a former gang leader in Chicago, an environmental activist in England, regular frustrated democrats in New York City and regular frustrated republicans in rural Michigan. And the whole goal was to see how did they get from high conflict, which is this really unpleasant, toxic, destructive kind of conflict, to good conflict? Because the problem isn't conflict, it turns out, it can feel that way. But the problem is the kind of conflict and all those people did make that journey, which was incredibly encouraging. And there were patterns and what happened for a second and third. So the book is really about how they did that. And how more of us could do the same if we want to.

Garrett Graff 06:27
If you talk a little bit about in the context of defining this realm that this sort of most naturally comes to mind, which is very intractable divorces. And I wonder if you can talk about how this appears in divorce cases, you're talking about high conflict as the mysterious force that incites people to lose their minds in political feuds or gang vendettas. I was so struck in the start of the book as you began to talk about this just in the context of divorce.
Yeah, and that’s actually where the phrase high conflict comes from. There are people who work in the divorce world as psychologists, lawyers, and they refer to high conflict divorce as one in which there are pervasive negative exchanges in a hostile environment where the conflict is the destination, so to speak, like the conflict doesn’t go anywhere, there’s no movement, and about a quarter of American divorces each year could be categorized as high conflict. So that’s like 200,000 divorces. So it turns out that there is there are also high conflict, politics, high conflict companies, high conflict people. So I think it’s a useful way to understand this special category of conflict in which there is not progress, right, where you’re just kind of stuck. And there’s a distinct difference between good conflict and high conflict. So for me, it helped me get out of the mindset of this sort of narrowing confines of the idea that we either have to have, you know, bipartisan unity, or be at each other’s throats, like those are not, those are not the only two choices. Just like in a marriage, you don’t have to get along all the time. And you also don’t have to, you know, verbally or emotionally or physically abuse each other. Right? There’s a lot of space in between that.

You have this this quote that I just loved it and sort of helped clarify for me a lot of what you’re talking about, where you quote the president of Germany, saying we are experiencing permanent indignation, a kind of social rage. And that really does seem like part of the challenge that we are wrestling with in our politics. They were you know, the names matter, or the names change. But the the outrage doesn’t. And I’m curious, as you trace this back, as you sort of dove into this, as you looked at the roots of this, when did America lose its mind, like sort of when did American politics tip over from, you know, a natural tension over policies and philosophies into something that is, you know, much more akin today, to, you know, a very bitter sports rivalry?

So most of the research on polarization dates that point back to roughly around the 80s, you know, in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam and other things that brought down the trust level and a lot of our institutions, right, and also, I would say, boosted the adversarial traditions of the news media. You know, many, many reporters still think they’re breaking Watergate every day or trying to write so there is this kind of adversarial, us versus them mindset that gets instilled from things like that. And then of course, you, you find that there were media outlets that figured out like Fox News that they could reliably not target the whole country, but use fear and grievances and anger, not all the time. Fox also does good reporting and did back then. But much of the time in order to
get a sort of niche audience coming back and back and back in that niche could grow and grow. So and other media outlets have obviously figured that out, as have social media platforms. So we've designed a lot of our institutions to incentivize high conflict, right? And the important thing about that is we can design are we design them, right? They're not, they're not from God, so we can design them to incentivize good conflict. And you see that right? In your own life, like you've probably we've all worked at places, or been in a church or synagogue or a neighborhood where there were cultures that dealt with conflict differently, right, maybe some places where they people avoid it, right. And that's sort of top down how the leadership deals with other and that doesn't work great, usually. But also, that's very common, and then other places where conflict is combustible, right? Like it's out of control, and destructive to the thing that the organization is supposed to be about. And then other places that have traditions and rituals and policies in place to make conflict healthier. So it is possible to tap into just as we are hardwired for high conflict, humans are hardwired for good conflict. And I would say most of human history is about good conflict, or we wouldn't have gotten to this point.

Garrett Graff 11:36
One of the things that you really talk about as being key to reducing high conflict is breaking out of the binary, the idea that you can't sort of reduce a situation, whether it's political or personal, or professional to the idea that there are only two sides or that there are only two possible solutions. And when you say our institutions don't come from God, you actually do talk about one faith that you saw and learned about in the context of, you know, naturally setting up a system that does not reduce things to political parties, or to political binaries. And I wonder if you could just talk about the Bahá’í faith as what you saw it being able to teach us about how to do politics better.

Amanda Ripley 12:30
It's funny, because I didn't know really anything about the Bahá’í faith before I started working on this. But the book was really about, you know, casting a wide net and seeing, are there examples of institutions that do conflict better, institutionally, then sort of enshrined in what they do. And the Bahá’í faith is really interesting. You know, the concept of it is that we're all connected, right? There is no us or them. So sort of fundamentally foundationally. The idea is that we're very interdependent. So in some ways, it's particularly appropriate for this moment in history when we are so interdependent, as we saw with, as we are seeing with a pandemic, and many other things. So the idea is that is the highest revered Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad, believing that all major religions come from one spiritual source started in the mid 1800s, in Iran has spread just about everywhere, there are 150,000 adherents in the United States, with the largest
community in India. So that's a pretty significant, small, but you know, global fee. And there are no ministers, no clerical leaders to run things. So how do they make decisions, right? So what they do is, and this is essentially one form of politics, each spring, everyone in each of the 17,000, behind locations gathers together to elect leaders. So you know, it's close to a pure democracy operating in some 233 countries, right? But here's the twist. Everything about these elections is designed to reduce the odds of high conflict, because the thing about high conflict is, once you're in it, it's very tricky to get out. It's very magnetic, and lots of psychological and sociological reasons for that. But the ideal is to stay out of it. Right? Like, don't let it start. So these elections are no parties allowed. No binary categories, people are not allowed to campaign for a position even if they want it. You can't even discuss who would be the best person you can only discuss which qualities are most needed. And then when they do the election, it's basically a pretty, you know, sober process after a prayer each person writes down the names of nine people who they think have the experience and character to lead the community at that moment, their secret ballots, and then the nine winners, you know, are announced there's no celebrating. It's considered a duty, not a victory, right? And then once they have the People in place and they have to make decisions for the community deal with conflicts that arise and budgets and all that sort of thing. They have some other traditions in place to keep the ego in check and keep high conflict less likely, one of which is their meetings are called consultations. And they do things like, if you propose an idea, if I Amanda brings to the table an idea, once I propose it, it's no longer my idea. It's the group's, right. So they're like these little things that sound small, but actually play into how humans work, and particularly in conflict, to help reduce the odds of the kind of binary us versus them dynamic that we know tends to lead to high conflict. So it's kind of interesting.

Garrett Graff 15:42
You also mentioned in your answer there, the pandemic. That was a subject that I actually wanted to spend some time talking with you about because you're a writer for The Atlantic and I wrote a piece at the start of the pandemic for The Atlantic last year that I have continued to chew over in my mind, about whether I got it terribly wrong. And, and I was thinking a lot about it in the context of your book and your writing on high conflict. Because I wrote about, you know, in March, you know, in the first year of this pandemic, way back at the beginning, what I saw as this unique spirit in America, you know, this sort of national moment of unity, and desire to work together as Americans that I saw, as, you know, a unique moment in American history. You know, a lot of my own history, writing has been focused on 9/11. And thinking about the unity that the country had, after 9/11 -- never forget, united we stand -- and sort of feeling like we were in this same moment, in the beginning, in middle of March last year, where you saw individual Americans making these choices about the pandemic, you know, closing their businesses ahead of when the
government told them to, you know, schools closing head of the government telling them to, and at that moment, I sort of was celebrating, you know, this spirit of 2020, that America is coming together amid the pandemic. And then of course, you know, every week since then it has felt less like a united nation, in the face of the pandemic. And I sort of keep coming back to, in the frame of high conflict, this question of sort of, it seems like Americans got the response to the pandemic, right. And then politics messed it up. How do you think about it in your own high conflict frame, the America that you have lived through in this last year?

Amanda Ripley 18:10
I think you were right then. And there was an opportunity for that period to last longer than it did. I mean, we know, all over the world, not just in America, there was a real coming together, you know, like you, I've covered lots of disasters and terrorist attacks. And this is always true, that there is this sort of golden hour after a terrible catastrophe or during when there's a very strong human pull to come together to help one another when you can really feel it. And it's an amazing, amazing experience. And it is, I think, one of our great powers as society. But it has to be harnessed, right, it has to be sustained. We saw in late March of 2020, that 90% of Americans said they believe we're all in it together, up from 63% in the fall of 2018. You know, it's hard to remember but the US Senate passed that massive first federal stimulus bill by a vote of 96 to zero, right? So you were quantitatively absolutely correct. People are wired to sort the world into us and them and we're also wired to expand our definition of us under certain conditions. And big shocks, like a pandemic can make us encompass the whole world overnight. So there's a huge opportunity in conflict to use those shocks. Peter Coleman at Columbia University studies conflict and writes about this a lot. There's these shocks that because high conflict is a system of interlocking diabolical parts that are sort of self perpetuating, like a motion machine. When you have a big shock to the system, it could be a weather event, it could be a death, it could be violence, it could be a new common enemy, like a virus. When you have a shock, it can up end, temporarily some of those interlocking systems, but you have to seize that opportunity, right, which is usually left to leadership right at the national or local or both level. And so on the one hand, I would say that that opportunity was not seized, particularly at the national level, lots of variants around the world and around the country on that, right. It was certainly seized in some places in some towns. And it's also true that the duration of this particular kind of cataclysm is is important that it's very hard for humans to sustain that feeling when it goes on and on, and there's no chance to recover, right? So you see this in war and other things, and this is why, you know, looking forward for future pandemics, it's so important probably from a psychological and sociological point of view, as well as biological point of view, to really start strong and united and clear, with very clear, consistent messaging that's been tested on real humans
in real time to try to front load the reaction so that you can make it shorter, because it's just it's, you know, it is fundamentally too much to ask for humans who are social creatures who need socializing and ritual and interaction, especially children, just the way they need food and water, it is too much to ask for it to go on this long, right. So I think both are true. It was a huge opportunity, there was a moment, but we had a pre existing condition for this pandemic, which was extreme polarization and high conflict. So that doesn't go away. Right? When this kind of thing happens. The last thing I'll say about this is that in hyperpolarized societies, one of the things you start to see is that the news media becomes sort of relentlessly negative on all sides of the spectrum. And there's a lot of reasons for that. But I also think that doesn't help us, right, because even when the caseload went down, when vaccines started to look like they were, you know, going to work, you didn't see a huge change in the tone and emphasis of a lot of the headlines. And there was a nice study done on this, by the way, about comparing the negativity of major US News accounts during the pandemic to international news accounts of the pandemic, and the US coverage was much more negative, even more negative than science journal coverage of the pandemic, right. So a lot of different things happening. But the bottom line is, when you have this level of high conflict, it's very hard to seize those opportunities.

Garrett Graff 22:45
And we talked a lot about and I'll sort of shorthand it here as the rogue cousin problem that we are in some way sort of all in conflict scenarios beholden to the most combustible people in the group, or loyalty circle. And you talk a lot about sort of competing groups and competing loyalties and competing identities in this. And I wonder if you could talk about the way that you end up calling them firestarters. Sort of, what are the things that cause people to be the source of high conflict?

Amanda Ripley 23:26
So the rogue cousin comes from the story of the Hatfield and McCoy feud, which many people may have heard of. But very quickly, you know, in 1878, Randolph McCoy visited Floyd Hatfield farm along the tug fork of the Big Sandy river on the border between Kentucky and West Virginia. These two families had lived peacefully side by side for generations, farming the land. And Randolph McCoy thought that he recognized one of the pigs on Lloyd Hatfield’s farm, and it must have been stolen from his farm. And no one could convince him to drop it. McCoy complained to the authorities, organized a trial, and McCoy lost that trial. And you know, that wasn't a great experience for him, but he let it he let it roll off of them. Everyone moved on. Now the problem is it was a group conflict because the Hatfields and McCoys had many, many relatives all over the area, and a full
year and a half after the trial two of McCoy's nephews got in a fight with a witness who had testified against McCoy in the pig trial, and they beat the man to death. So this is the moment the feud sort of combusted and became a high conflict. A small dispute morphed into an intractable one. And over the course of the next decade, there was a stabbing, vigilante shootings, posse raids, a Supreme Court case, you know, women were beaten, 80 people got drawn into the feud across the region. So you know, I just explained this to say that one of the conditions that reliably seems to lead to high conflict, and every case I've looked at, our powerful group identities that are made salient by leaders, right. So this is because when we experience collective emotion, it geometrically compounds the conflict, right? Because you don't personally have to be attacked, or insulted or humiliated. But if someone in your group is attacked or insulted or humiliated, it feels and we humans process this literally in the same parts of the brain that process pain, it feels like it's happening to you. And the reverse is true. You know, when someone in your group does something amazing and powerful. You feel pride, just like sports fans are going to these great studies or sports fans were after their team wins basketball game, they feel like they're more likely to be able to do amazing feats personally, like in a you know, games or contests, which is clearly not true, right? But it's a collective emotion feels very true, if acts true, it is our perception. And so those powerful group identities, particularly when there are two. I think there's something again about this binary. This is where our particular political system has a winner take all system where there are two parties is really designed for high conflict, right, based on what we know about human behavior and conflict. So those powerful oppositional groups, it doesn't bring out our best conflict instincts. As humans, I think it's fair to say.

Tricia Johnson  26:32
This is Aspen Ideas to Go. Thanks for listening. Today's global problems are complex, entrenched and intertwined. The Aspen Ideas team has partnered with the Skoll Foundation to produce a new podcast about solutions. Solvers features unconventional social innovators. Hear from infectious disease expert Christian Happi, activist and community organizer, Alessandra Orofino, social entrepreneur, and nonprofit executive Rodney Foxworth, and many others. Find Solvers wherever you're listening now, and be one of the first to leave a review on Apple Podcasts.

Garrett Graff  27:11
One of the things that I was fascinated or curious to talk with you about is, like, what does America do with the lessons that you have laid out in this book? We are locked into this intractable high conflict in our politics, and most of us don't want to be there. And I think that sort of another part of your book is talking about how conflict hollows out the middle,
and that that's something that's, you know, consistent in politics, it's consistent in war zones. What advice do you have to the country, as we wrestle with where we are right now?

Amanda Ripley 27:55
So at the collective level, at the sort of macro level, one thing that goes to what we were just talking about, about the binary is to make significant reforms to our electoral system to make third parties possible, you know, the founding fathers did not want there to be parties, let alone just to, there's no reason we have to stick with this formula. We know from the research that Lee druckmann and others have done about polarization that countries that have multiple parties, and things like rank choice, voting, proportional representation, tend to be less polarized and have more trust, the system is more fair, it feels more fair, and it is more fair, which changes everything and lowers the volume and the sense of grievance and injustice when you lose. So some states have already moved in this direction with rank choice voting, Maine and Alaska, others are trying to actively there are every session, there's a bill introduced in Congress to do to make this happened. So that's the kind of thing you can tangibly, you know, get behind that just makes a lot of sense. The other thing that I think is important to realize is how much of this is also operating at an individual level. And it's also operating on elites, the people in power need to change what they're doing. And they have also been captured by high conflict, right? So I want to talk just very quickly about some of the individual things that people can do, not just elites, but everyone, things that I've done in my own life. So, you know, another precondition of high conflict typically is the presence of conflict entrepreneurs, who are people, companies, platforms, pundits, who intentionally exploit conflict for their own ends. It could be for profit, but often I find it's for attention, for a sense of meaning and camaraderie, or for power. So becoming aware of who those people are in your own life or in your social media feed. Or in your news diet, and trying to put some distance between you and them if you want to sort of stay out of high conflict, that's something that we know is very effective. The people I followed for the book, including this politician who found himself caught in his vortex of high conflict, one of the first things he did was to start relying on different people for political advice, he moved away from the sort of seasoned veteran political organizer that had been advising him who saw the world in sort of black and white good and evil, win war fight, lose those kinds of words, which are classic conflict entrepreneur, rhetoric, and mood to somebody else who saw a lot more nuance and humanity among the people he disagreed with. And, you know, to take a more extreme example, Curtis toller, the former gang leader that I spent a lot of time with in Chicago, he literally moved across town to help him get out of that conflict that he was in, which is many years long vendetta, so people couldn't find him. And when things went bad, as they always do, and his cousin who he was very close to was brutally murdered, he
didn't know who had done it, right, like he couldn't react the way you normally would, and retaliate because of that distance he had created. So everything you can do to slow down, conflict is very important at the individual level, but also at the collective level.

**Garrett Graff  31:22**
Yeah, you started by saying that this book grew out of basically where you saw yourself in journalism and the stories that you were covering and sort of wondering where they came from, and why they were so challenging. And so I wonder how this book changed the way that you do your journalism. I know it change the way that you talk to your family, because you talk about the way that you try to listen differently around the dinner table. But when you're out doing your job, I mean, how do you report differently? How do you write differently? How do you explain differently now that you understand this backdrop?

**Amanda Ripley  32:01**
Yeah, so the rules of engagement for journalism and anything, don’t apply the same way in high conflict, they just will not work and they will often backfire. So for me, I had to develop a whole new set of rules of engagement in order to be useful in high conflict. And you know, it's hard like I'm still figuring it out. I'm interested in suggestions. And I'm working a lot with the solutions journalism network, which is a nonprofit that trains newsrooms to help them do this to how do you cover controversy in ways that illuminate rather than just exacerbate the conflict. And one of the sort of overarching ideas from the research is that you have to complicate the narrative that your audience has going into a really polarizing issue. And that requires knowing what that narrative is, because it’s going to be different for different audiences, right? And figuring out where are the places where that narrative is not actually true, or is very limited. And using either history or different locations or a broader lens, a wider lens on the problem to see what is really happening to help your audience have a richer, fuller and more useful view of either the conflict the other side or themselves? Right. So that’s now how I sort of tried to measure success is is this story going to help illuminate anything about this conflict? And if not, I’m not going to do it. So that’s an I, you know, it’s easier said than done. But I actually think that many newsrooms and editors right now, not all, but particularly at the national level, have fundamentally underestimated their audience’s desire and ability to handle complexity right now. And I think that most Americans want something very different from the news than what they’re getting. So I think there’s a huge opportunity to do journalism differently, particularly in conflict and to be useful to people at this moment, when we’re not being as useful as we think.
Garrett Graff 34:00
Switching over to some questions from the audience here. This one is from Richard. Did you change your mind on any principles or theories as this book unfolded and the research unfolded? What surprised you about your research?

Amanda Ripley 34:17
Man, many things, I think one thing I changed my mind about was, I had sort of bucketed different conflicts in different categories. Like I thought polarization was a thing like political polarization. I don't think that’s very helpful. Like I think, everything I’ve seen human behavior in different kinds of conflict, whether it’s gang conflict, or war or political conflict, the behavior at a fundamental level is not that different. So I’m trying to be less siloed and how I look at the research and how I look at storytelling. The other thing I would say is, you know, I’d become much more suspicious of my own righteousness. When it flares up, and I want to be careful here, because sometimes people say, you know, they, it sounds like I’m saying you can't be passionate, or you can't be angry, or you can't have radical ideas. And I think we really need to get more nuanced and how we talk about these things. Because you can have really radical vision and movement for social change, we need those things without being in high conflict. Right. So some of the differences between good conflict and high conflict are really telltale signs, and you can feel them in yourself and see them all around you. One is in good conflict, there’s still some curiosity, there might be moments of surprise, you experience a range of emotion, not just to emotions, in high conflict, it's much more everything feels really clear, like much clearer than it probably is. And you begin to generalize about many millions of people you don’t know and will never meet, right. And so that lack of humility, that lack of complexity, I've come to see is quite dangerous, not just for the country, though it is. But also the most chilling part about high conflict. And every story I followed was that everyone involved in high conflict eventually begins to mimic the behavior of their adversaries, you eventually do the thing, consciously or not, that you went into the fight? To stop, right. So the politician who goes into politics to make it less toxic and more inclusive, he made it more toxic and less inclusive. And there’s a million examples like this, right? So this is the the, the warning about high conflict is if you want to change the world, this is important. Make sure that you cultivate good conflict, because otherwise you will end up risking the thing you hold most dear.

Garrett Graff 36:59
Are there any national political leaders or even state level political leaders that you see as the embodiment of the good type of conflict that we want to be encouraging? Like, who does this well on the state or national level that you’ve seen?
Amanda Ripley   37:20
It’s funny, you should say that, because I’m trying to work on right now a project of actually ranking or quantifying members of Congress and other high profile leaders, not just in politics, but in in the news media and other places to figure out like, who are the conflict entrepreneurs and ways we can measure? And who are the sort of conflict interrupters? And maybe most interesting, who used to be a conflict entrepreneur? And is not anymore? Right. Now, this is hard because our system incentivizes, especially the national level, it really incentivizes conflict entrepreneurs, right, just like Twitter does. And so we’ve set up every incentive for this and no disincentive, really, at this point. And again, that’s all fixable, changeable, and should be fixed and change. But, you know, we’re asking people to be something different than what they’ve been rewarded for being for many years. But I think it’s a great question. And I’m working on it. I have some theories, but I want to use some data instead of my intuition.

Garrett Graff   38:24
Question here from Lawrence. What is the role of technology in encouraging high conflict and sort of how much of this is, uh, basically the tools that we are using to live in the digital age versus, you know, something that is actually new to our society?

Amanda Ripley   38:50
Yeah, I mean, I think any attention economy is going to play to high conflict, right. So whether it’s news media, or social media, anything that makes money off of seizing your attention, the cheapest, literally cheapest way to do that is through fear and indignation. Right. So that is sort of the race to the bottom that we’ve seen in many different industries. Right. So I think that is definitely accelerated. That said, I think we focus a lot on you know, social media, which is definitely important to focus on and reform. But, you know, this started way before social media and some of the people who are most kind of captured by high conflict in their rhetoric and in their, the way they’ve sort of estranged family members and these kinds of things in the research are not on Facebook and Twitter. So if you look back where you see a lot of this starting From a technology point of view is with talk radio and cable news. So I don’t I think it’s important to really just cast a broad net when we talk about the ways that technology has incentivized high conflict. I think that’s true. And it’s not just social media.

Garrett Graff   40:21
Another question here from Elizabeth. How do we help kids develop the muscles to handle
complexity and avoid high conflict? And I'll personalize it a little bit also by saying, you know, how do you parent differently? Now that you understand high conflict?

Amanda Ripley  40:40

It's tricky, because there is just like, I mean, you know, I have a teenage son, and he's living in the world, he's reading the news, it is very easy for him to slip into sort of sweeping generalizations about good people and bad people. And I get that, right. And I don't want to just be the person who's always like, well, let's look at the full picture. But I also have found that if I try to connect it to his own life, or our own family, that can be helpful, like, how do you resolve conflict among your friends, or in a soccer game? Or in our family? And think about that? How would we overlay that it sounds maybe you know, it's too simplistic, but I actually think it's quite complex to try to make that connection. And the thing that I do, which you mentioned, and I do this, in all my interviews now to this is probably the thing that's changed the most for me, personally, and professionally, is I do this technique called looping, which I described in the book, and there's other forms of it out there. But when someone is telling me something that they're bringing any level of emotion to and can be low level of emotion. But if somebody is upset, let's say, my kid is upset about something happening in the world or in his life, the first thing that people want is to be heard, like, there's a ton of really interesting research on this. That's what people want, and they almost never get it. So once people feel heard, and you do this by showing them like proving beyond a doubt that you've heard them not by just nodding, and you know, smiling, but actually saying it sounds like what you're saying is, you feel like it's fundamentally unjust, that you can't go back to school in person, even though your teachers vaccinated. I'm making this up. But let's say you first acknowledged that you heard them and then you have to this is the easy to forget, you have to ask if you got it right. Did I get that right? Like with genuine curiosity, you cannot fake it, you have to be genuine. And when you do this, it is amazing. It is amazing what it unlocks and people and people, even people who are very different from me who have very different political opinions than I do, and and life experiences than I do. Once they feel hurt, which they don't mistake for agreement, by the way, they don't think I agree. Once they feel like you're really trying to get them. They open up. And the research shows this. They say less extreme things afterward, they acknowledge more ambivalence and complexity, which all of us carry, but gets stifled in high conflict. And they're more open to information they maybe don't want to hear. Often in parenting, once you've done it, the issues over like, you don't have to actually do anything else. It's amazing. You have to fix it. You don't have to argue it. You don't have to make your case. You just make sure they feel heard and everybody can move on. So it's a it's an incredible, it's an incredible skill that we should absolutely be teaching kids.
Garrett Graff 43:36
Amanda, thank you so much for joining us. Thanks for putting together such a wonderful and relevant and timely book.

Amanda Ripley 43:43
Thank you, Garrett. Thanks for having me. I enjoyed the conversation.

Tricia Johnson 43:51
Journalist Amanda Ripley has written for The Atlantic, The New York Times, the Washington Post, and many others. Her latest book is High Conflict. Garrett Graff is an award winning journalist who has spent nearly a decade covering national security. He leads cyber initiatives for the Aspen Digital program at the Aspen Institute. Their conversation was held in April as part of the Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn book series. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you listen to podcast. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today’s discussion is from the Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn book series. And this show is produced by Marci Krivonen and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.