

A CALL TO ACTION

THE SPIRIT OF LIBERTY: AT HOME, IN THE WORLD

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FOR
THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE



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For the George W. Bush Institute
Human Freedom Initiative

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The Bush Institute engaged research fellows to develop ideas and options for how to affirm American values of freedom and free markets, fortify the institutions that secure these values at home, and catalyze a 21st century consensus that it is in America's interest to lead in their strengthening worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

This Call to Action is part of a major new effort of the George W. Bush Institute's Human Freedom Initiative. It seeks in a bipartisan way to affirm American values of freedom broadly understood, to fortify the institutions that secure these values at home, and to help catalyze a 21st century consensus that it is in America's interest to lead in their strengthening worldwide. The goal of this paper is to identify several areas for action by government and the private sector, by institutions and individuals, to advance this effort.

The premise of all that follows is that the unique promise of America and the source of its greatest strengths is its commitment to a particular vision of the human good. That vision begins from the free and equal individual, endowed by our Creator with the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It broadens out to the core social institutions necessary for the formation of such individuals into responsible free men and women, and therefore into citizens able to participate in self-government.

Such a government, itself rooted in this vision, can enable freedom and prosperity, and can advance the interests of its people both at home and abroad. When the United States engages the wider world with confidence in this distinct vision of the good and with fidelity to our nation's most important and enduring principles, the result is greater respect for individual human rights, more widely shared economic prosperity, and stable international peace. All of this, in turn, redounds to the advantage of the American people.

To engage the world with credibility, and with the popular support that is necessary in a democratic system, the United States must continue its long journey toward becoming a more perfect union, both dynamic and self-correcting, striving to offer "liberty and justice for all." Every generation needs to

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assess how well we are living up to the nation's promise, take steps to close the gap between our aspirations and our reality, and galvanize renewed confidence in our democracy. Only then can Americans go forth in the world to lead the democracies with confidence and purpose. For more than 75 years, the liberal international order purposefully constructed in the aftermath of World War II has helped secure peace, advance justice, and expand prosperity in the United States and around the world by advancing this vision of the good. This is an extraordinary

historical achievement, and American leadership has been central to its success. As historian Robert Kagan has written,

Perhaps democracy has spread to more than a hundred nations since 1950 not simply because people yearn for democracy but because the most powerful nation in the world since 1950 has been a democracy. Perhaps the stunning global economic growth of the past six decades reflects an economic order shaped by the world's leading free-market economy. Perhaps the era of peace we have known has something to do with the enormous power wielded by one nation.¹

Yet today that order appears to be under attack and at real risk of dissolving. The crisis is not new or sudden. It has been mounting for years.² Yet there is a certain urgency newly in the air. We may be approaching a tipping point. If we as a nation are to be equal to the challenges that now confront the free world, we need to be clear and confident about what we are fighting for, not just what we are reacting against. Americans need to take action, to celebrate, protect, and extend the spirit of ordered liberty at home, and in the world.

To do that, we must first grasp that a series of seemingly separate and distinct mounting threats amount in combination to a serious danger to the ideals and institutions at the core of the American experiment. Our way of life is in peril, and we must step up to defend it.

THE CHALLENGE

EXTERNAL THREATS TO THE DEMOCRATIC ORDER

The liberal democratic world order is under assault in the first instance from those who never fully embraced democracy, free markets, and universal principles of human freedom. Some are hard, unyielding dictatorships like Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Others (including Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela) have been part of, or seemed for a time to be approaching, the community of democracies but have reversed course under their current leaders. Deficits of liberty and human rights continue to define most of the Middle East, Central Asia, and large swaths of sub-Saharan Africa, with accompanying poverty, oppression, and insecurity.

In recent decades, Russia and China in particular have drafted on the global system of rules, seeking to game it to their advantage. Today these governments foster national narratives of grievance as they challenge the global order ever more aggressively. In tandem with other authoritarian regimes, they seek to weaken and destroy the system of international law and organizations, genuinely defensive military alliances, and multilateral trade regimes.³ Their brazenness has been well documented, even in the form of direct assaults on western elections. Simultaneously, together and separately, China and Russia are building out alternative international structures based on largely state-directed economies riddled with corruption and political repression, including the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in which both participate.⁴

Russia and China's leaders now pursue self-preservation strategies by curtailing liberties, generating conflicts, and manufacturing "enemies of the people" at home and abroad. With growing confidence and purpose, they seek to upend the existing world order, acting as if prosperity and peace can only be understood in zero-sum terms, exactly the opposite of the paradigm that has guided the United States and its democratic allies for three generations. The growing success of their efforts to push back against what had been a global consensus has contributed directly to the current

worldwide recession in democratic performance. Each year since 2005, Freedom House has shown an overall decline in global freedom.⁵

The established world order is also under external attack from non-state actors, including criminal networks, narco-traffickers, and rogue officials in many countries who exploit the rules that most people and businesses abide by to siphon public resources for their personal enrichment. The most dangerous non-state actors are violent extremists in the Islamic State and its spawn around the world, who have radicalized men and women to launch murderous attacks on civilians at work and play, as well as on symbols of democratic authority.

CORE DEMOCRACIES IN DISARRAY

Perhaps even more troubling than the backsliding in those places beyond the democratic circle is the increasingly evident downdraft in democratic resilience in countries that have long been part of the consolidated democratic West. This is different than a failure to advance the democratic frontier. It is what some scholars refer to as *democratic deconsolidation*.⁶ In much of the Western world, we are seeing a rise in demagogic populism, illiberalism, nationalism, and protectionism. In short, fading confidence in the institutions of democracy and the market economy. This is due in significant part to the failure of the democracies to deliver on the promise of a better life for many of their citizens. Indeed, the recovery from the Great Recession of 2008-2009 has been characterized by exacerbated income inequality and wage stagnation across the democratic world.

In much of the Western world, we are seeing a rise in demagogic populism, illiberalism, nationalism, and protectionism.

Europe, in particular, is in deep crisis. While “the West” is more about values and institutions than it is about geography, there is no democratic “West” without Western Europe. Popular support for leaders and parties once considered beyond the pale has doubled and trebled in recent years. Party systems in Spain, France, Italy, and Greece are in tatters. Five years after the European Union was

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its historic achievement of banishing war from a war torn continent, the EU and its leaders seem to have lost their sense of direction.

Support for polarizing candidates of the left and right alike has grown in several countries, and the United Kingdom's Brexit vote showed diminished support for the very idea of European solidarity. In May 2017, while many observers rejoiced in the strength of Emmanuel Macron's presidential election victory, fully one-third of French voters cast their ballots for Marine Le Pen, a paragon of the pro-Russian, anti-Semitic, anti-EU National Front. In September 2017, while Angela Merkel won reelection as chancellor, Germans for the first time since 1945 voted a far-right party into the Bundestag. Since 2013, the Alternative for Germany party has tripled its share of the vote and will now hold 94 out of 709 seats in Germany's federal legislature.

The dynamic between peoples and governments varies. In some cases leaders are trying to assuage restive, angry electorates as they seek to win elections, falsely promising simple solutions to complex problems. In other cases, such as Hungary and Poland, governments are deconstructing the democratic states they were elected to lead. The reasons for this socio-political crisis across Europe include serial financial crises that brought several countries to insolvency, displacement attributed to globalization, sustained structural unemployment especially among young people, simmering angst about the growing immigrant population, the Migrant Crisis of 2015-16, and a spike in highly visible terrorist attacks. All of this has been deliberately exacerbated by a widening Russian information war and other conspicuous meddling that seeks to disrupt European politics.⁷

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

America is not immune from the rise of illiberalism. Indeed, some observers posit that the populist strain in democratic politics, both on the left and the right, has its origins in the United States.⁸ Whatever the genesis, in 2017, politicians and media personalities in America have energized partisan and racial confrontation, to the point where racists and nativists have been emboldened.

Confidence is also waning in America's governing institutions and in the utility of free markets and international trade to better the conditions of working-class Americans.⁹ Many recent polls have shown that a majority of Americans favor more trade restrictions and think that current U.S. trade agreements have done more harm than good.¹⁰

According to pollsters Jeremy Rosner and Whit Ayres, while the American people's support for the core principles and components of democracy remains intact, the intensity of support for democracy is waning. Meanwhile, the growing rancor toward political opponents has heightened as partisan polarization has grown to historic degrees, even over which constitutional freedoms matter most.¹¹

At the core is a sense among many Americans that during a period of global reordering their country is failing to deliver on the promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and that policies to advance freedom and free markets internationally come at too high a cost.

The factors that have given rise to these sentiments are complicated. There is no question that global economic disruption is altering the landscape of work in ways that many Americans find difficult to navigate. Even when jobs are lost due to technological innovation, many Americans blame immigration, legal and illegal alike. Others blame the out-migration of jobs on foreign trade and corporate leaders who enjoy the high end of still-widening economic disparity that has seen the United States emerge from the Great Recession without clear benefit for working-class families.

As Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska has noted:

*[W]hat we are going through now—the past 20 or 30 years, and the next 20 or 30 years—really is historically unique. It is arguably the largest economic disruption in recorded human history. And our politics are not yet up to the challenge.*¹²

Nor, it seems, are other institutions up to the challenge. Consider the struggles of contemporary journalism. Throughout our nation's history the Fourth Estate has been considered part of the system of checks and balances. Professional journalism today is not only facing constant financial pressure, but also finds itself under increasingly intense political assault. For reasons both self-inflicted and caused by those who want to undermine and delegitimize the press and its role in ensuring government accountability, the media today is widely mistrusted.

The American political system is also broken and polarized, for reasons having to do with the heightened ideological and geographic sorting of the parties, gerrymandering, diminishing transparency in campaign finance, the rise of poll-driven negative campaigning, a more partisan media environment, and much else. This contributes to voters' low esteem for political leaders and the institutions they inhabit.

Racial and ethnic tension and polarization are also on the rise. High rates of incarceration in the United States and its disproportionate effect on minority communities, as well as controversies about policing in some places, pose troubling questions about the credibility of the promise etched above the entrance to the Supreme Court: "Equal Justice Under Law." The violent neo-Nazi and white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 highlighted the rise of what David Brooks describes as "white 'identitarian' politics"¹³—a new and growing strain of illiberal populism that threatens America's social order. Slavery has been America's besetting sin, and while progress toward racial equality and reconciliation has certainly been made over the course of our history, we are far from a whole and healed land.

Political discourse, too, is in a damaged and degraded state. Given the increasing conflation by even senior public officials of fact and fiction, opinion and information, and resort to outright fabrication and dissembling, the challenges of policymaking become even more difficult. Many American citizens who believe the economy no longer works for them now conclude that national politics doesn't work at all. Politics has become increasingly bitter and polarized, with the major parties moving away from the other. The political center, which for years included moderates from

both parties, has all but disappeared, making compromise and progress more difficult. Many Americans, weary and worried, feel it is time for the United States to turn inward.

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs has shown a steadily rising percentage of Americans who believe that it “will be best for the future of the country if we...stay out of world affairs.” Those numbers are up from 25 percent in 1947 to 35 percent today, having peaked in 2014 at 41 percent.¹⁴

Of particular concern is that young people, who in the past were the most enthusiastic supporters of democratic values, may now be among the most skeptical.¹⁵ The degree of erosion is contested by opinion researchers and scholars, but it is something to be alert to.¹⁶ Every generation faces the problem of forgetfulness and ingratitude. And in our time, this problem often takes the form of taking liberal democracy for granted while forgetting (or never learning) how brutal and soul-destroying the alternatives are.

Can the United States be the leading advocate for freedom and free markets in the world if we lack

Can our society continue to thrive if we do not play an active and constructive role in shaping the wider world?

confidence in the ideas that informed and energized our growth as a nation and our contributions to making the world more peaceful, prosperous, and free? Can our society continue to thrive if we do not play an active and constructive role in shaping the wider world? Given America’s long and deep attachment to democratic ideals and institutions, how seriously should we view the current downturn in enthusiasm for basic tenets of democracy and open markets? In order for America to be a credible advocate for democracy and markets, democracy and the marketplace in the United States have to be seen, by

Americans and non-Americans alike, to be working well.

Reasonable people disagree about the extent to which this phenomenon can be attributed to the historical or recent U.S. posture in the world—whether the United States has been guilty of over-reach or under-reach. Regardless, there is overall more continuity in foreign policy than discontinuity,

and effective American leadership is clearly required to address the democratic deconsolidation around us and to respond to the challenges proffered by the rising authoritarians. To be sure, there are serious and reasonable conversations to be had about how to improve on what has been created and how to address shortcomings—in burden sharing, in NAFTA, NATO, and the United Nations system. As former U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez has noted, NAFTA was negotiated a quarter century ago and clearly needs to be updated to incorporate the rise of the digital economy, among other things.

For its part, the Bush Institute aims to address the rising doubts about the merits of democracy and help galvanize a new 21st century American consensus on behalf of democratic freedom and free markets and the institutions that allow the spirit of liberty to flourish at home and in the world. This involves wrestling with a series of inter-connected questions:

What are the roles for federal, state, and local government, schools and universities, philanthropy, business, and the many social networks that have long served as conveyor belts of democratic values and norms—from trade unions and PTAs to fraternal organizations and veterans associations?

What are the roles for ordinary citizens and voters?

How important is political leadership at all levels in shaping public confidence in democratic ideals and norms?

If the problems are structural, what can be done about them?

What are the new, specific challenges posed by social media?

A CALL TO ACTION

The issues at hand and the problems the United States faces are complicated and not easily solved. In many cases they have deep roots, decades in the making. Although the challenges are difficult, this doesn't mean they can't be overcome. After all, Americans have time and again rallied together to overcome daunting challenges, including the Great Depression, two world wars, a long Cold War, and the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The American capacity for self-renewal and regeneration is one of the wonders of history. But self-renewal does not happen by itself. It requires concentrated effort.

One of the duties of citizenship is to ascertain the respective roles that individuals, organizations, and institutions can play in fortifying democracy and to do one's duty within that framework. These don't need to be heroic or history-shaping actions. They can be specific, modest contributions that are like steps in a long journey. Whatever is required, all of us have to decide whether to be active or passive in this key moment in the life of our nation. We have to take stock of our responsibilities.

Because informed action is better than uninformed activism, there is an urgent need to better understand the current thinking of the American people. That is why the George W. Bush Institute, Freedom House, and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement are undertaking a major opinion research study to contribute to understanding the concerns Americans have about the current state of our democracy and America's role in the world.

The remainder of this paper identifies several areas and actions our society and government can take, internationally and domestically, to strengthen democracy and revive the faith of Americans in it.

These actions will fall into four broad categories:

1. **Harden our Defenses.** Both the general public and those overseeing our political process need to be more alert to and resilient in the face of growing attacks from external enemies on American democracy.
2. **Project American Leadership.** We need to reinvigorate confidence in the public that our national interests are best served by American policies that bolster the global world order, which in turn enhance prosperity, ensure security, and advance the protection of universal human rights.
3. **Strengthen the American Citizen.** We must nurture a broadly shared appreciation of the importance of active citizenship, which means improving the ability and inclination of Americans to assume responsibility for what they find around them—in their communities, in the nation, and in the world.
4. **Restore Trust in Democratic Institutions.** We have experienced a nearly across-the-board loss of faith in public and private institutions over the last several decades, including government, Congress and the Supreme Court, organized religion and public schools, the media, big business and organized labor. There's no question that restoring faith in American democracy requires restoring faith in our democratic institutions.

These four areas are deeply intertwined. They address, respectively, the vulnerability of our democracy to threats from hostile regimes, a loss of confidence in our capacity to lead in the global arena, a weakening of our commitments to core principles of American self-government, and a loss of trust in the key public and private institutions that compose our society. When you put these together, you find that our way of life—the very idea of the free society as Americans have

understood it in the modern era—is now under attack. Its opponents, at home and abroad, are assertive and confident. And yet most Americans do not discern the seriousness of the danger. We rarely see that danger as a whole, as this document seeks to do.

Many of the particular recommendations contained in this Call to Action therefore amount to wake-up calls. They are not detailed technical or legislative proposals but rather ways of drawing the attention of the nation to a grave and urgent need. They are means of rousing our country and its leaders and alerting them to the need to defend our way of life, and to redouble our commitments to what makes our country possible, and exceptional.

The discussion that follows begins with the external dangers we confront—specifically the foreign threats to our democracy. It then works its way inward toward the core of the our society’s democratic soul, proceeding from the need to defend ourselves against foreign threats to the need to proudly assert our commitment to the principles of freedom in politics and economics, the need to instill our key civic ideals in the rising generation at home, and the need to revitalize the public and private institutions of which our society is ultimately comprised and through which we as individuals come to be formed.

All four now demand our attention. The stakes for America’s future could hardly be higher.

HARDEN OUR DEFENSES

In a world of many dangers—among them nuclear weapons in the hands of rogue states such as North Korea or Iran; terrorist attacks in major European cities and lone wolf attacks in the United States; mass violence in Syria, abetted by states such as Russia and Iran; China’s mounting military challenge to its neighbors and the United States in the Pacific; and Russian military aggression against its neighbors—one of the most urgent threats to America is its vulnerability to cyber-attacks and manipulation. This is no longer a hypothetical future threat, something portrayed in a James Bond movie. It is a real and present danger in a highly interconnected world, with the potential to undermine faith in democratic institutions, violate privacy, debilitate the nation’s infrastructure, and disrupt our financial system.

The Chinese government’s theft of millions of federal-employee personnel records in 2014

The newest and arguably the most insidious form of this danger is the effort of foreign governments to influence American political discourse and undermine the credibility of our democratic election process.

demonstrates that hostile states already have sought ways to invade, disrupt, and suborn our government and its people. The North Korean government’s digital disruption of Sony Pictures the same year was a further reminder that American commerce is vulnerable to attack at the hands of hostile foreign powers.¹⁷ The news in September 2017 that personal financial information of 143 million Americans was stolen from the credit reporting agency Equifax by attackers as yet unknown further underscores our economy’s vulnerability to mischief from criminals and foreign agents.

The cyber threat also includes the recruitment of young people to join violent extremist organizations.

The newest and arguably the most insidious form of this danger is the effort of foreign governments to influence American political discourse and undermine the credibility of our democratic election process. The Russian influence campaign in the 2016 presidential election, which used a

combination of cyberattacks, disinformation, and financial influence, has been confirmed by the American intelligence community. Russia sought to undermine Americans' faith in the legitimacy of our democracy and tip the election in favor of one side. The effort was undertaken as part of a broad geopolitical strategy to undermine the stability of liberal democracies and the international order more widely, and it was initiated at the direction of Vladimir Putin.

The Alliance for Securing Democracy, a bipartisan initiative housed at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, finds that Russia has meddled in the affairs of at least 27 European and North American countries since 2004, with interference that ranges from cyberattacks to disinformation to financial influence campaigns. According to Clint Watts, a former FBI agent and counterterrorism specialist who is now a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the goal of Russia's efforts "is to make the institution of democracy look not credible. Either the institutions are corrupt or you can't trust the vote."¹⁸

Tools like the Alliance for Securing Democracy's *Hamilton 68* dashboard, which monitors the activities of 600 Twitter accounts linked to Russian influence efforts online, have shown that Russia is promoting malicious content to exploit political, religious, and societal divides in the United States. Facebook has revealed that accounts with apparent Russian ties purchased political ads aimed at American voters during the 2016 presidential campaign.¹⁹ As of October 2017, it has deleted 470 "inauthentic" and associated accounts that were based in Russia. Senator Mark Warner called Facebook's report the "tip of the iceberg."²⁰

Subsequent reporting has indicated that Russian-sponsored activity on social-media platforms including Twitter and Facebook may have led to in-person rallies and protests in at least 17 cities during the 2016 election.²¹ Russia targeted the election systems of 21 states for attack.²² In September 2017, Facebook said 10 million people saw ads placed by Russia's Internet Research Agency, including spots "focused on divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum."²³ It was reported, in fact, that Russian bots were generating inflammatory comments on Twitter on *both sides* of the emotional controversy about NFL players protesting racial injustice by kneeling during the national anthem.

This is an extraordinary development, and for America an unprecedented one. The U.S. intelligence community assessed in January 2017 that “Russia’s effort to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represented a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations aimed at U.S. elections.” The report, issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, concluded that “Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the U.S. presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against U.S. allies and their election processes.”²⁴

Other authoritarian regimes are likely to adopt some of Russia’s tactics and try to attack the United States and other democracies. We are at present wholly unprepared for this new form of threat, as a government and as a people.

In recent months, several efforts have emerged to address the cyber aggression against our democracy. Just as the threats are coming in multiple ways, multiple efforts to push back are vital. Given that these tactics seek to divide Americans against each other, it is important that Americans build bipartisan coalitions to develop strategies to respond.

A major societal reckoning is needed. Americans, including America’s political leadership, need to realize and be willing to say that democracy in the United States and in Europe is under assault, not by invading armies but through asymmetric technological attacks. The goal of that assault, led currently by Russia, is to undermine faith and confidence in one of our society’s most fundamental rights: the ability to choose our own leaders.

Among the necessary responses are:

- **Secure our elections infrastructure.** In the words of former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, “We know what it takes to strengthen election cybersecurity. But we need to

start taking the issue seriously.”²⁵ The bipartisan National Election Defense Coalition, for example, recommends measures such as establishing voter-verified paper ballots as the official record of voter intent; safeguarding against Internet-related security vulnerabilities and assuring the ability to detect attacks; ensuring that voting systems and supporting information technology have the latest security patches; discouraging voters from voting online in any form—via web, email or fax—even in states where it is legal; and requiring robust statistical post-election audits before certification of final results in federal elections.²⁶ There’s also a bipartisan effort in Congress to limit access to election systems to qualified vendors, secure voter registration logs, help ensure proper audits of elections, create more-secure information sharing about threats, and establish proper standards for transparency. Securing the U.S. elections infrastructure can be done in ways that do not infringe upon states’ control of elections.

- **Learn from others who have been attacked.** Countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Georgia, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine have all been the target of Russian disinformation campaigns and are fighting back. We can learn from them. One specific example is Stopfake.org, a university-based initiative that seeks to verify and refute disinformation about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media. The group now examines and analyzes all aspects of Kremlin propaganda, including in other countries and regions.²⁷ The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), an American organization, has partnered with Stopfake and others to develop an educational initiative to help Ukrainian citizens fight back against propaganda and fake news. Some of these techniques could be utilized in America.
- **Enlist social media in the fight.** Information distributors like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Reddit can promote greater transparency, make algorithmic changes to impede the spread of questionable and false stories, and award ad credits to users who push back against disinformation and propaganda. Facebook, working in conjunction with fact-checking organizations, has started pinning a “disputed” tag on fake news.²⁸ These kinds of efforts need to be monitored carefully (taking into account the limits and potential biases of fact-checking enterprises themselves) and, if effective, replicated and built on.²⁹

- **Increase transparency in online political advertising.** American laws governing political advertising need to be updated so that the origins of political ads on social media are at least as transparent as those on television and in print.
- **Eliminate the influence of foreign money in American politics.** Loopholes that enable circumvention of laws intended to block direct foreign influence must be closed. The Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) needs to be more strictly enforced, with greater penalties for violations imposed. Beneficial ownership of companies and real estate assets should not be allowed to mask the true owners of assets from government scrutiny.
- **Help Americans become better consumers of news and information.** A December 2016 Pew Research Center study found that about two-in-three U.S. adults (64 percent) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.³⁰ “The biggest tool for combatting disinformation is promoting robust debate and educating people on how to identify reputable news sources,” according to the Alliance for Securing Democracy.³¹ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab uses social media to track and expose global disinformation campaigns.³² These kinds of initiatives need to be expanded.

“The biggest tool for combatting disinformation is promoting robust debate and educating people on how to identify reputable news sources.”

The Russian government-funded cable network RT (formerly Russia Today) and similar entities should be among those required to register under FARA. According to the report by the U.S. intelligence community on Russian meddling in our 2016 presidential election, “RT America TV, a Kremlin-financed channel operated from within the United States, has substantially expanded its repertoire of programming that highlights criticism of alleged US shortcomings in democracy and civil liberties. The rapid expansion of RT’s operations and budget and recent candid statements by RT’s leadership point to the channel’s importance to the Kremlin as a messaging

tool and indicate a Kremlin-directed campaign to undermine faith in the U.S. Government and fuel political protest.”³³

American schools are also key to this cause. They can help teach young people how to interpret what they encounter in the media, from new social-media platforms to traditional broadcast and print media. Initiatives like the News Literacy Project, a national, nonpartisan effort to “teach middle school and high school students how to sort fact from fiction in the digital age” could be supported and enlarged.³⁴ The project’s partner organizations include, among many others, ABC News, Associated Press, Bloomberg, BuzzFeed, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *New York Times*, *Politico*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

- **Make it clear that this threat is a priority.** The urgency of the threat requires the creation of a presidential commission to examine foreign influence in American elections and marshal public support for the practical steps necessary to stop it.

PROJECT AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

The United States needs to reassert its role as the ultimate guarantor of the global order based on freedom and free markets, enmeshed in an international system of agreed-upon and enforceable rules and agreements. We live, after all, in a world largely shaped by America and within a liberal democratic order that overall has served the American people well. It has also been a boon to other peoples of the world.

Notwithstanding recurring war, strife, and natural disasters, the world has never seen a time of such prosperity, peace, and individual opportunity.

As President Barack Obama said in 2016:

*If you had to choose a moment in history to be born, and you didn't know ahead of time who you were going to be, you'd choose now. Because the world has never been less violent, healthier, better educated, more tolerant, with more opportunity for more people, and more connected than it is today.*³⁵

This isn't incidental or accidental. For more than seven decades the United States has consistently, if imperfectly, led the world toward these achievements. No other nation can match the ability of the United States to simultaneously do so much so well:

- Keeping the world's sea lanes open with military might while convening negotiations on lowering tariffs expands commerce and prosperity at home and abroad.

- Sustaining an entrepreneurial culture, where innovation and capital come together from around the globe, making it possible to build ever more useful things that enable humans to thrive—in medicine, industry, education, entertainment and the arts, technology, and communications.
- Mobilizing the international community to confront and contain rogue states like Iran and North Korea and aggressors like Russia, as well as to battle non-state terror networks like ISIS and al-Qaeda, enhances the security of Americans and the world.
- Convening multilateral discussions on long-term challenges like global climate change and development strategies for the poorest nations, while addressing urgent public-health crises arising from Ebola and Zika outbreaks, protecting Americans now and in the future.
- Leading initiatives in multilateral forums, such as the Organization of American States or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, elevating and enforcing respect for the fundamental human freedoms Americans enjoy and which others still seek.

We live... in a world largely shaped by America and within a liberal democratic order that overall has served the American people well. It has also been a boon to other peoples of the world.

The United States, then, remains the indispensable nation.

One key to America's success in shaping the post-World War II world was bipartisanship, which also allowed for continuity across administrations and congresses. For decades, the United States witnessed a generally impressive bipartisan commitment to international engagement and partnership with other nations. Even when foreign aid, treaty alliances, lowering trade barriers, and interventions abroad were unpopular with segments of the public, America's leaders worked together to promote policies that secured the nation's interests and helped foster peace and prosperity in much of the world. That unity of vision was key and is too often missing today.³⁶

In the contentious 1980s, bipartisan agreement was possible on some important matters, including the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy, as the United States' flagship enterprise in the provision of support to non-governmental pro-democracy activists worldwide. More recently, in the fight against HIV/AIDS and malaria in the developing world, there has been agreement on the humanitarian and national security merits for U.S. investment. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which President George W. Bush launched in 2003, has been sustained with strong bipartisan support and was championed by President Barack Obama. Today more than 11 million individuals across the globe receive antiretroviral treatments thanks to the generosity of the American people. Americans in turn benefit from enhanced global public health and improved national security.

Yet many Americans have grown weary of the burdens of global leadership and unsure about its benefits. That weariness is understandable but ultimately self-defeating. One way to ease the fatigue is to show the American people in concrete, tangible, real-world ways why U.S. engagement and global leadership is in their self-interest. To do so requires fresh and compelling approaches that take into account Americans' frustrations and anxieties.

Central to this effort is for American leaders—in politics, business, media, and civil society—to do a better job of engaging their fellow citizens in a conversation about how freedom, free markets, and free trade are beneficial and mutually reinforcing.³⁷ Also vital would be a campaign to demonstrate why it is important for the United States to be present and effective in a range of multilateral forums.

Mindful that America's credibility and influence in the world is strengthened or weakened to the extent our country is seen to be living up to our founding principles, the following are concrete steps that should be taken.

Expanding Trade and Economic Opportunity

American political, business, and civic leaders who support a global order based on democracy and free markets need to be consciously and consistently explaining to their constituencies, customers, and employees why they should support free trade and trade agreements. Often, only the opponents are active in making grassroots arguments.

In order to advance the case for trade, advocates must work to ensure that America's trade

Openness to the world economy is an important source of American leadership and dynamism.

agreements in fact do support good American jobs, raise wages, and improve our national security. At the same, to be true to America's support for freedom in other countries, trade agreements have to be crafted in ways that do not exploit or exacerbate oppressive working conditions in other countries, including the use of child labor. Openness to the world economy is an important source of American leadership and dynamism. We should never enter into a trade agreement that prevents our government from putting in place rules that protect the

environment, food safety, or the health of American citizens.

These can be broadly agreed-upon principles. Open trade has, after all, long been championed by political leaders in both parties as the most effective and advantageous way to organize the modern global economy. Republican and Democratic administrations alike for more than seven decades have argued for zero tariffs on goods and free movement of services and capital; non-discriminatory treatment of foreign goods, services and investment; transparent, science-based regulation; and respect for national sovereignty.

Advocates say this approach places restraints on government interference in the economy and puts the consumer in charge. Indeed, some describe this as the natural economic counterpart to political democracy. Critics often focus on the asymmetry in these arrangements, wherein the benefits (low prices and wider choice for consumers) are widely shared, while the costs (lost jobs and wages) are concentrated in specific communities, sectors and companies most directly affected by the movement of capital and supply chains that leave some Americans unemployed.

There is truth to this critique, which is why more needs to be done to enable displaced American workers to find new jobs. As the Peterson Institute for International Affairs noted in its assessment of the prospective benefits of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, helping the workers inevitably displaced by free trade is “a compelling ethical and political objective,” because “workers in specific locations, industries, or with skill shortages may experience serious transition costs including lasting wage cuts and unemployment.”³⁸

Analysts on both the left and the right, however, have criticized the longstanding Trade Adjustment Assistance program that is intended to help workers displaced by trade deals find new employment and interim compensation.³⁹ It is therefore essential to find a better way forward, in which some of the greater wealth that accrues to the country as a whole from free trade is used to help displaced workers share in the benefits. Alongside this effort, policymakers should learn from the kinds of ideas advanced by the nonpartisan National Skills Coalition, an organization that brings together employers and unions, educators and political leaders at the local, state and federal levels to promote job-driven workforce development strategies including apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and creative collaborative skills-building for workers at all ages.⁴⁰

Multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements usually work best with other democracies because those countries also enjoy the rule of law, free and independent media, and respect for fundamental liberties such as freedom of association and the rights of workers to bargain collectively for wages and conditions. Indeed, in cases where bilateral trade agreements have been negotiated with partners where these rights were weak or tenuous, as in the case of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), an American objective in negotiating has been to strengthen those rights as a condition of closing the deal.

Abrogating trade agreements not only hurts Americans’ prosperity, but also harms those countries whose interests align most closely with the United States and whose support we rely on in other situations.

Therefore, several actions are required now:

- **Make a concerted and compelling case for the benefits of global trade.** The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, the National Federation of Independent Business, and local labor councils need to come together to explain how communities and families benefit from international commerce and free trade agreements—and, just as important, what needs to be done to ensure that these agreements live up to the promise of more widely shared prosperity for Americans. As noted above, a new national consensus on how to provide meaningful transition assistance for displaced workers and their communities is an imperative if trade agreements are to be politically viable in our democracy in the 21st century. Distinguishing the economic dislocation arising from globalization, automation, and technological innovation from the specific dislocations associated with trade pacts will be key for any of these efforts to succeed, so that more Americans can embrace positive change and look to the future with confidence.
- **Update the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).** Twenty-five years after NAFTA was negotiated, there is broad recognition that it should be updated. Given how deeply intertwined the North American economies are today, it behooves us to commit to a serious upgrade in the agreement that paved the way for today’s trade and investment relationships. Done right, we have an opportunity, together with our Canadian and Mexican partners, to exercise global leadership on trade today, just as North America did in 1992. Yet renegotiation cannot become an excuse for American withdrawal or capricious limits on market competition. Leadership in this context means opening markets, keeping competition strong, and ensuring that both jobs and profits are the purpose and the result. Analysis by the George W. Bush Institute finds that from a macro perspective the United States, Canada, and Mexico have all enjoyed “strong economic growth, significant net job creation and increases in global exports since NAFTA was signed.”⁴¹

Done right, we have an opportunity, together with our Canadian and Mexican partners, to exercise global leadership on trade today, just as North America did in 1992.

- **Revive ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).** This pact among twelve nations bordering the Pacific Ocean—not including China—would encompass 40 percent of the world’s economy, lowering tariffs and accelerating commerce. Opponents persuaded many Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, that it was a secretive deal that would only favor big corporations and other countries. However, the principal beneficiary of the U.S. withdrawal from TPP will be China, not the United States. Business and labor leaders need to revisit this agreement and find a way, whether through better public education or through adjustment of the terms, to assure Americans that this is in fact a good deal. Alternatively—or perhaps simultaneously—the U.S. should (a) encourage the other eleven countries to ratify and implement the regional agreement, awaiting the day when the United States might join an existing operational compact, and (b) explore bilateral free trade agreements with key countries, starting with Japan and perhaps Indonesia, that are compatible with the TPP.
- **Finalize negotiation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the United States and the European Union.** Though these long-running negotiations have been complicated by the impending likely withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, this trade agreement would encompass almost 50 percent of the world’s economy and include America’s longest-standing trade partners and staunchest allies, overlapping as it does with NATO. Reviving and elevating twin negotiations—with the EU on the one hand and the UK on the other—should be at the top of the American agenda in trade diplomacy.

Integrating Values and Interests

Seventy-five years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt delivered one of the most consequential State of the Union addresses in American history. In what became known as his Four Freedoms Speech, Roosevelt shared his vision of a world rooted in freedom of expression and worship and freedom from want and fear. He made the case that the “future and safety of our country and of our democracy are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders.”

In the war and in its aftermath, America, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, promoted its values as a way to promote its national interest. As Kenneth Wollack, president of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, noted in Senate testimony in 2017, “The notion that there should be a dichotomy between our moral preferences and our strategic interests is a false one.”⁴² The United States needs to approach its role in the world with an eye to aligning its values and interests.

Key building blocks to sustaining this strategy for the 21st century include:

- **Help the public see how democratic allies help make America safer.** Military and political leaders should look for opportunities to highlight America’s ongoing cooperation with NATO allies and non-NATO partners, not only in Washington but also in the communities across the country that host military installations. This could help the American public better appreciate the contributions of our alliances to the battles against ISIS and other threats to American security. For example, close to home, our strong relations with two stable, market-oriented neighbors—Canada and Mexico—contribute to American security and are almost universally underappreciated. Farther afield, the tiny Republic of Georgia, a new democracy that is confronting Russian invasion and occupation of significant portions of its national territory, is nonetheless contributing the fourth largest number of troops to the war in Afghanistan.⁴³
- **Finance America’s diplomacy and development assistance.** The instruments of American soft power are essential to securing U.S. interests around the world. While the efficacy of any particular efforts must always be examined and opportunities for greater efficiency and accountability pursued, what must remain constant is the recognition that the U.S. State Department and American development agencies are “critical to preventing conflict and reducing the need to put our men and women in uniform in harm’s way.”⁴⁴ As James Mattis said to Congress in 2013 when he was Combatant Commander of the Central Command, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.” Business leaders also recognize the value of such efforts. In a 2017 letter, 225 corporate leaders signed a letter voicing their “strong belief in the return on investment from the U.S. International Affairs Budget

in advancing America's economic interests overseas and supporting jobs at home...Strategic investments in diplomacy and development make America safer and more prosperous."⁴⁵

- **Sustain the infrastructure to support democratic advancement.** We need to ensure adequate support for the key elements of the democracy promotion enterprise that President Ronald Reagan catalyzed 35 years ago in his speech to the British Parliament at Westminster. These elements include the National Endowment for Democracy, the State Department (especially its Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor), the U.S Agency for International Development (especially its Center for Democracy, Rights and Governance) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. These all provide funding and strategic policy direction to the array of American organizations that bring the global experience of democracy-building to those people and countries seeking to learn how to build systems and develop habits of governing democratically.⁴⁶ Each of these organizations plays a vital role, and together they mobilize the wider array of expertise and knowledge that exists in the private and nonprofit sectors to share information and skills. Congressional action to ensure that the FY 2018 appropriations for these are robust has been heartening.⁴⁷ There are certainly ways to improve the structures, operations, and financing of America's "democracy bureaucracy," but not at the expense of the overall mission or the interests of the United States.
- **Appoint ambassadors who are articulate defenders of American values.** Over the course of the last generation, the promotion of democratic values has become second nature to virtually every American ambassador and many other officials in the national security sector. While human rights considerations do not usually outweigh urgent security and other interests, President Reagan found the right balance when he said,

While we must be cautious about forcing the pace of change, we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take concrete actions to move toward them. We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is

*not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.*⁴⁸

So care should be taken when decisions are made about ambassadorial positions worldwide, and especially in multilateral bodies where ambassadors' voices are amplified. In 2007, speaking before a crowd of dissidents and democracy advocates gathered in Prague, President George W. Bush called for his Secretary of State to direct "every U.S. ambassador in an un-free nation [to seek] out and meet with activists for democracy and human rights." Calling on our ambassadors, drawn from the ranks of career diplomats and non-career experts and appointees, to highlight consistently the importance of human rights issues as American priorities will continue to attract good will from our allies and respect from our adversaries.

- **Compete more effectively in the war of ideas.** America is getting beaten in the 21st-century war of ideas. Our adversaries today are not united in a single worldview, but they do share a common hostility toward liberal democracy. In this competition, our greatest asset is America itself. Enabling the world to see us as we are, an eclectic, dynamic society striving to live up to ideals of equality and opportunity, fairness and justice, rather than as our adversaries portray us, is the best messaging. As scholars Martha Bayles and Jeffrey Gedmin have written,

*Public diplomacy must not shy away from presenting America as a noble experiment in which the better angels of human nature have a chance, at least, to prevail against the worse. Much of the commercial media no longer do this, and social media cannot fill the vacuum. ... Sharing [America's] debates is the best possible public diplomacy, precisely because so many people around the world are forbidden to speak their minds on any topic of public significance.*⁴⁹

All of this requires being more strategic in our public diplomacy, more clearly defining our goals and interests as a nation. It means sustaining and strengthening our best tools to influence key people in other societies: exchanges and scholarships, as well as the international broadcasting outlets. It also means investing strategically in both traditional and new methods of public diplomacy. It also requires reviving a U.S. agency for public diplomacy that is authorized and equipped to fight the 21st-century war of ideas. This would be an independent, nonpartisan entity that has its own budget and decision-making power. As James Clapper, former director of national intelligence, said in January 2017 testimony, "I do think that we could do with having [an information agency] on steroids...to fight this information war a lot more aggressively than I think we're doing right now."⁵⁰ Both Republicans and Democrats have put forward versions of this idea, which ought to be explored and acted on.

STRENGTHEN THE AMERICAN CITIZEN

In his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush said:

In America's ideal of freedom, the public interest depends on private character - on integrity, and tolerance toward others, and the rule of conscience in our own lives....

In America's ideal of freedom, the exercise of rights is ennobled by service, and mercy, and a heart for the weak. Liberty for all does not mean independence from one another.

This sentiment has run like a golden thread throughout our history. Since 1789, the Great Seal of the United States has been a symbol to ourselves and to the world of a nation bound together by the self-evident truth that human beings are “created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Emblazoned with the words *e pluribus unum*, Latin for “out of many, one,” the Great Seal is intended to depict America’s 13 original states “joined in one solid compact.”

Unity around a shared compact is being tested in the United States today. According to the Pew Research Center, we are more polarized politically than at any time in the last 20-plus years, with Democrats shifting farther left and Republicans farther right. This “political sorting” is compounded by dramatic demographic changes, especially an aging population and growing ethnic and racial diversity. The result is a spillover of our political division into nearly every aspect of our lives, affecting who our friends are, where we get our news, where we live, and how we raise our children.⁵¹ This is having a pernicious effect, dividing us rather than unifying us, causing us to view others as aliens instead of as fellow citizens and, increasingly, to view those of another political persuasion as unpatriotic and even dangerous to the survival of the republic.

At times like these, we need to revivify our identity as Americans and embrace the shared responsibilities of citizenship in a free society. While the task of strengthening ourselves as citizens has many dimensions, two areas for focus and renewal are civic learning and civic service.

Civic Learning

For Americans to become more responsible and engaged citizens, we must know our history and the foundations of our political system. We must develop civic literacy. Yet according to the Annenberg

According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center, two-thirds of Americans in the United States today cannot name all three branches of the federal government.

Public Policy Center, two-thirds of Americans in the United States today cannot name all three branches of the federal government.⁵² More than one-third do not know the rights enshrined in the First Amendment.⁵³ Studies also show that less than one-third of American students in grades four, eight, and twelve are “proficient” in civics—that is, in “the knowledge,

skills, attitudes, and experience to prepare someone to be an active, informed participant in democratic life.”⁵⁴

It will take time to reverse these trends, but some things can be done immediately:

- **Encourage state and local policymakers to put a renewed focus on civics.** While all 50 states have curricula and standards for “social studies,” there is opportunity to improve outcomes by increasing instructional time in schools, ensuring high standards and assessments to measure learning, and making investments in professional development and training for teachers. Governors, chief state school officers, state and local school boards, and superintendents can and should take more of a lead. A number of states are already undertaking important initiatives that are worth watching. For example, in 2010, Florida enacted the Sandra Day O’Connor Civic Education Act, which introduces civics in elementary school and requires a course and assessment in middle school.⁵⁵ According to a report by Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg of Tufts University, student test scores in Florida are already improving and teachers who participate in professional development are experiencing better results among their students.⁵⁶ A new state law in Arizona requires all high school students to pass the same test that immigrants must pass to obtain citizenship. Some experts think these precepts should be taught even earlier in middle school. Twenty-three other states have begun to follow Arizona’s lead since 2015, and a nonprofit organization in Scottsdale has its sights set on all 50.⁵⁷

- **Focus federal resources.** In an environment of reduced funding for civics education, the federal government should be encouraged to focus its resources across agencies—from the U.S. Department of Education to the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Institute of Museum and Library Services—by incentivizing high quality models of civic learning that can be replicated at state and district levels. The philanthropic sector should also provide greater support for new and effective models.
- **Promote innovation and technology.** *The Economist* has lamented that civics education in the United States has become “little more than rote study of the structures of government.”⁵⁸ It highlights efforts to change that, including initiatives like iCivics. Founded in 2009 by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, iCivics teaches students about government through online, interactive games. To date, the organization’s games have been accessed more than 45 million times, and experts are studying how this kind of learning contributes to the development of more active and informed citizens. Both the public and private sectors can help improve the quality of similar learning tools and techniques.
- **Assess civics attainment more frequently.** The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as “the nation’s report card,” provides important data about how much American students know in key academic areas, including civics and basic knowledge of our democracy. In a 2013 cost-saving effort, the National Assessment Governing Board (which oversees the NAEP assessments) decided to drop civics testing for students in grades 4 and 12, retaining only periodic examinations of students in grade 8. Given the urgency of fostering the next generation of Americans who know and are equipped to defend our democracy, these assessments should be reinstated, which can be done at a minimal cost.
- **Encourage bipartisan efforts to prioritize civic education.** Nationwide, educators, philanthropists, political leaders, and parents are beginning to call for more effective civics education. Initiatives like the nonpartisan Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit, which in

2017 brought national leaders and institutions together to spotlight the country's civic education crisis and consider solutions, are a welcome development and should be encouraged.

Service to Community and Country

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, it was the American propensity for civic association that most impressed him as the key to the country's unprecedented ability to make democracy work. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition," he observed, "are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute."⁵⁹

More than a century-and-a-half later, scholar Robert Putnam documented how civic engagement in the United States was in decline. In his groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, Putnam presented a trove of data showing how from the 1960s to the 1990s Americans were steadily "withdrawing from their communities." Almost across the board—from family dinners to meetings with neighbors to signing petitions—Americans had become less and less connected. In addition to these revelations, Putnam acknowledges that *Bowling Alone* accomplished something else:

*[It] roused deep interest in the broader concept of "social capital"—a term that social scientists use as shorthand for social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust to which those networks give rise. No democracy, and indeed no society, can be healthy without at least a modicum of this resource....[S]cholars and political leaders around the world were seized by the question of how to foster the growth and improve the quality of social capital.*⁶⁰

More recent research and surveys suggest civic participation in the United States may be resurgent. And a May 2017 study by Congress’s Joint Economic Committee found that compared to several decades ago we are spending less time with neighbors but no less time with friends. There’s less racial segregation but more class segregation, less trust generally in institutions but no less trust in friends or local government, no less volunteering, less voting, and mixed trends on political engagement. The report concludes, “Our review of changes in associational life over the past several decades suggests that in many—but not all—ways, what we do together has become more circumscribed than it used to be.... The connective tissue that facilitates cooperation has eroded, leaving us less equipped to solve problems together within our communities.”⁶¹

Gaps remain—and opportunities to close those gaps, including serving our community, deserve attention. Here are two things that can be done:

- **Foster a spirit of service in schools.** In *Making Civics Count*, Professor James Youniss of Catholic University demonstrates that “when political matters are integrated with classroom learning, students can develop identities as knowledgeable and capable citizens.” Three methods, Youniss writes, can be especially effective at fostering active and engaged citizenship among young people: participation in student government, discussion of politics and other controversial issues, and “purpose-driven” service that fosters “civic and political meaning.” The state of Illinois enacted legislation in 2015 that prioritizes these methods. Their efficacy should be carefully monitored and, if they prove successful, replicated.
- **Champion voluntary service.** John Bridgeland, first Director of the USA Freedom Corps under President George W. Bush, is a well-known champion of voluntary service. In his book *Heart of the Nation*, he writes that “Our nation has long relied on volunteer service and it needs now more than ever to keep its sights set high to engage more Americans in service to their communities and country.” Mr. Bridgeland, along with General Stanley McChrystal and others, are advocates of yearlong, paid service by every high school or college graduate in the country. They are pursuing this vision through the Service Year Alliance, a joint venture of the Aspen

Institute and Be The Change. This is just one example of how social entrepreneurs across the United States are building new and innovative opportunities for Americans to fulfill one of the great responsibilities of citizenship. Both public and private sectors can play a part in taking good ideas to scale.

RESTORE TRUST IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

According to Gallup, Americans' confidence in most of the nation's major institutions—from newspapers and television news to public schools, banks, organized labor, the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system, Congress, big business, small business, police, and organized religion—edged up in 2017, but only after registering historical lows over the previous three years.⁶²

Americans clearly lack confidence in the institutions that affect their daily lives. The reasons for this are varied, from shifts in attitudes toward “expressive individualism” (the belief that an individual's highest loyalty should be to himself or herself) and away from communal attachments, rising skepticism toward authority and tradition, and the belief that we are, in the words of the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, “artists of our own lives.”

Bill Bishop, co-author of *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, puts it this way:

Everything about modern life works against community and trust. Globalization and urbanization put people in touch with the different and the novel. Our economy rewards initiative over conformity, so that the weight of convention and tradition doesn't squelch the latest gizmo from coming to the attention of the next Bill Gates. Whereas parents in the 1920s said it was most important for their children to be obedient, that quality has declined in importance, replaced by a desire for independence and autonomy. Widespread education gives people the tools to make up their own minds. And technology offers everyone the chance to be one's own reporter, broadcaster and commentator.⁶³

Yet there is also the sense that our institutions are not performing particularly well, and in some cases they have forfeited our trust. This loss of faith in institutions is not without merit, but the ongoing distrust can be corrosive. It weakens the ties that bind us together as Americans. It attenuates our confidence in American self-government. And it undermines the most important means we have to combat the social breakdown that everyone agrees must be addressed.

Institutions are concrete manifestations of our associative life. It is through them that we create

Strong institutions produce strong, engaged citizens.

communities that allow us to thrive. Strong institutions produce strong, engaged citizens. Weak institutions produce weak, isolated ones. And today, most of our key institutions have lost the confidence of the public.

As Gallup's Jim Norman put it, "Each institution has its own specific probable causes for this situation. But the loss of faith in so many at one time...suggests there are reasons that reach beyond any individual institution. The task of identifying and dealing with those reasons in a way that rebuilds confidence is one of the more important challenges facing the nation's leaders in the years ahead."⁶⁴

The recommendations on how to rebuild trust in so many individual institutions could take up shelves of books. A full accounting is clearly beyond the scope of this report. But there are ways to think about this that may be helpful, both generally speaking and specific to particular institutions.

To start, it would be a useful exercise for the leaders of public and private institutions alike to articulate in clear language what they believe their institutions are for. How do they see the institutions they run serving the needs and ideals of the communities and society they are a part of? What role, if any at all, do they see themselves playing in bettering America? That may be easier for the heads of some institutions more than others, but we are all, in a sense, civic shareholders, with obligations not just to the needs of our institutions but also to the needs of the country.

Meanwhile, those who are responsible for the institutions of our democracy need to demonstrate leadership befitting a democracy. They need to focus on their fundamental purposes, honestly assess

their weaknesses and why the public is losing trust in them, and be wise and prudent in embracing reforms that will make their institutions more transparent, accountable, and effective.

Institutions that once struggled have shown a self-correcting capacity to recover. Compare the U.S. military in the 1970s, when it was beset by problems, to the military today. It is in far better shape and, along with small business and the police, one of the most widely respected institutions in the country. Other institutions fare far worse with the American people, namely Congress, big business, the media, the criminal justice system, and organized labor.

As part of a broader repair effort, it might be useful to consider some examples. Each set of institutions discussed below—the media, religious institutions, and higher education— is of course very different from the others, and they are only three out of the vast number of kinds of institutions that are a part of American life and in which confidence is waning. No single recommendation can apply to all of them, and no single fix is available to any of them.

The loss of trust in institutions is a long-term, complicated trend, and it won't be reversed all at once. Yet the solutions are hardly beyond our reach, and in America there is always reason for hope and confidence.

The Media

From newspapers to television to news on the Internet, the media have experienced a massive loss of trust among the American people. In a poll released in September 2016, Gallup found that Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" has dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32 percent saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. (The portion of Republicans who say they have trust in the media has plummeted to 14 percent.) As Gallup's Art Swift puts it, this is "a stunning development for an institution designed to inform the public."⁶⁵

The media encompasses many more sources of information than in the past, including conspiracy-minded, bigoted and unabashedly partisan websites. But a few kinds of steps might help revive faith in more traditional media outlets:

- **Clearly differentiate commentary from news.** Too often news organizations are blurring the line between opinion and impartial news coverage. Those blurred lines need to become more like red lines. News organizations need to take more purposeful steps to differentiate between commentary and impartial news coverage, including keeping “impartial” reporters from becoming news commentators on social media.
- **Increase transparency in reporting.** The media needs to recommit itself to greater transparency, which includes posting supporting documents and materials so readers can judge for themselves about interpretation and reducing reliance on anonymous sources. When anonymous sources are relied on, the media should help its audience understand their motivation and circumstances as clearly as possible without revealing them.
- **Continue to show greater diversity.** News organizations have done a good job in recent years in achieving greater ethnic and racial diversity, but there is significant room for improvement in achieving greater geographic, class, ideological, and cultural diversity among reporters, television anchors and producers, editors, and others. Doing so will both expose and mitigate biases and reduce mistrust.
- **Follow accuracy check lists.** Like doctors and airline pilots, journalists should use simple, commonsense checklists to prevent errors. “Ensuring accuracy is already part of a journalist’s workflow, and many of the steps outlined are already followed on most stories,” according to journalist and scholar Steve Buttry. “The checklist just makes it more consistent and rigorous.”⁶⁶
- **Admit and correct mistakes.** When mistakes happen, as they will, media institutions should report thoroughly and openly on their own errors, as *Rolling Stone* did when it commissioned

Columbia University's School of Journalism to review and publish a report about its deeply flawed and false story about an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia.⁶⁷ Strengthening and revitalizing the Society for Professional Journalists, among the best organizations for reviewing and commenting on ethical practices, should also be a priority.

Organized Religion

In 2016 the Gallup organization found that Americans' confidence in organized religion dropped to a record low.⁶⁸ According to Gallup, confidence in organized religion dropped from 52 percent in 2006 to 41 percent. (That figure remained unchanged in 2017.)⁶⁹ Only one other institution—banks—lost as much public confidence, slipping 11 percentage points over the same period. It's worth noting that:

In 1973, "the church or organized religion" was the most highly rated institution in Gallup's confidence in institutions measure, and it continued to rank first in most years through 1985, outranking the military and the U.S. Supreme Court, among others. That began to change in the mid- to late 1980s as confidence in organized religion first fell below 60 percent, possibly resulting from scandals during that time involving famed televangelist preachers Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. Confidence in religion returned to 60 percent in 2001, only to be rocked the following year by charges of child molestation by Catholic priests and cover-up by some in the church.⁷⁰

According to Mark Chaves, Professor of Sociology, Religious Studies, and Divinity at Duke University and author of *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, "The American public has lost confidence in leaders of all sorts. But the loss of confidence in religious leaders has been more precipitous." (Using data from the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study, Professor Chaves looked at

developments in American religion since 1972 and examined congregations in the United States from several religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam.)⁷¹ Professor Chaves found that that in the early 1990s 30 percent of Americans “strongly agreed” that religious leaders should not take part in politics. By the late 2000s, that number had jumped to 44 percent.

Religious leaders cannot be silent on public matters. After all, many of the greatest advances in justice in American history, including abolishing slavery and ending segregation, were the result in part of religious involvement in politics. But the manner and style of that involvement is key. When religious leaders and institutions use their faith as partisan weapons in our political wars, it undermines the credibility of their core work. Sociologists have found that connecting organized religion to partisan political agendas has led to a rise in the “nones,” meaning individuals answering “none of the above” when asked about their religious preference.

Some steps that might help rebuild trust in organized religion include:

- **Expose and redress wrongdoing.** When scandals happen, religious institutions and their leaders need to focus on fully exposing and redressing the wrong rather than attempting to defend the institution through secrecy. The mindset needs to be that the best way to serve institutions is to serve their ideals, not protect them from bad publicity or accountability. This message must come from the top.
- **Adopt zero tolerance policies.** There needs to be zero tolerance for serious moral and ethical transgressions, including, but not limited to, the abuse of children by religious leaders and those in positions of authority. Church superiors who protect abusers, rather than the abused, should face serious sanctions and discipline.
- **Exercise greater financial accountability.** Meeting standards for financial accountability, transparency, fundraising, and board governance is vital for maintaining and restoring trust in religious institutions. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, for instance, provides accreditation to leading Christian nonprofit organizations that demonstrate compliance with

established financial and management practices. Organizations like this are essential to holding religious institutions accountable, alerting the public, and withholding accreditation when they are out of compliance.

- **Don't subordinate religious faith to partisan loyalty.** Representatives of religious institutions who present themselves as authority figures on matters of faith and public life need to be much more careful about allowing themselves to be viewed as political operatives. Religious faith should not be subordinated to partisan loyalties and political power. "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state," Martin Luther King Jr. said. "It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool."
- **Champion civil and constructive dialogue.** Faith leaders need to play a more active role within their own communities in championing a more civil and constructive public dialogue. They can do this by their teaching and by modeling how to debate public matters with conviction but also respectfully and without dehumanizing others. They can explain why religious convictions are not at odds with religious toleration, and point out why the latter is in the self-interest of faith communities. In this unusually polarized and fractious time, faith leaders have unique influence with their congregants. They can appeal for reconciliation rather than division and show that principled people can also embody magnanimity and a generosity of spirit.

Higher Education

It is often said the United States has the best system of higher education in the world. In some respects, this is true. For example, we have, depending on the ranking, 18 or 19 of the top 25 universities in the world, when the metric used to make the assessment is colleges as research institutions (e.g., Nobel Prize winners on staff, journal articles published). However, when it comes to international tests measuring academic knowledge of college graduates, the picture is much more mixed.⁷² The United States, depending on the area of knowledge being tested, is often average and

in some cases below average.

Yet arguably the most serious problem facing many colleges and universities has to do with confusion over what was once a core purpose of the academy and a college education: freedom of inquiry and expression. Instead of enlarging their minds, too many students today are being shielded, or shielding themselves, from words and ideas they don't like or don't understand. They are treated like porcelain dolls, fragile and in need of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and protection from micro-aggressions.

Prominent colleges and universities, whose very purpose should include exposing students to

Regardless of political affiliation, all students suffer—and ultimately our country is weaker—when colleges and universities fail to foster civility and open intellectual environments.

competing points of view and allowing intellectual debate to flourish, have instead become institutions of intolerance. Far too many speakers, almost all of whom are conservative, are being shut down, with some students resorting to violence in places like Middlebury College.

“Something strange is happening at America's colleges and universities,” according to Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, writing in *The Atlantic*. “A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”⁷³

Not surprisingly, many Americans are starting to sour on higher education. Only 33 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in colleges and universities, while 67 percent do not. Among Democrats, the split is 56-43. Overall, less than half of those surveyed in a Gallup poll (44 percent) expressed confidence in colleges and universities.⁷⁴

Regardless of political affiliation, all students suffer—and ultimately our country is weaker—when colleges and universities fail to foster civility and open intellectual environments. In order to rebuild

trust in higher education institutions, it is worth considering a number of steps:

- **Adopt the Chicago Principles of Freedom of Expression.** In 2016 incoming freshmen at the University of Chicago received a letter from the dean of students declaring, “Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings, we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”⁷⁵ This letter followed a Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, which concluded that “it is not the proper role of the university to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive... concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.”⁷⁶ This report and the principles it champions should be a model for every college and university in America.
- **Endorse the American Association of University Professors’ views on academic freedom and trigger warnings.** For more than a century, the AAUP has championed academic freedom on college campuses, which should allow faculty and students to “engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation” and give them “the right to express their views—in speech, writing, and through electronic communication...without fear of sanction.”⁷⁷ The organization’s 2014 report on trigger warnings states, “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual.”⁷⁸
- **Foster campus cultures that value free expression.** Colleges and universities should replicate what Purdue University did: create a free speech orientation presentation for incoming students. At Purdue, the university’s legal counsel moderates the session.⁷⁹ This is part of an effort to create a culture where free expression is valued and understood. One institution that is doing outstanding work in this regard is the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), whose mission is to defend and sustain individual rights at America’s colleges and universities.

- **Help parents and students fairly judge the intellectual climate on campuses.** Heterodox Academy, a politically diverse group of social scientists, natural scientists, humanists, and other scholars who want to improve our academic disciplines and universities, has produced the *Heterodox Academy Guide to Colleges*, which rates America’s top 150 universities and the top 50 liberal arts schools (as listed by *US News and World Report*) according to the degree of viewpoint diversity one can expect to find on campus.⁸⁰ This is a practical way to help parents and students find academic environments where different political viewpoints are welcomed and where students aren’t afraid to speak up.

Heterodox Academy has also launched an initiative to assist students who want greater viewpoint diversity on campus. Northwestern University is the first school in the United States to pass student-directed resolutions to promote viewpoint diversity and guard against political orthodoxy on campus.⁸¹ Efforts like these need to be supported and expanded. Finally, as Lukianoooff and Haidt argue, “The biggest single step in the right direction does not involve faculty or university administrators, but rather the federal government, which should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education.” What this means concretely is that:

*Congress should define peer-on-peer harassment according to the Supreme Court’s definition in the 1999 case Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education. The Davis standard holds that a single comment or thoughtless remark by a student does not equal harassment; harassment requires a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student’s access to education. Establishing the Davis standard would help eliminate universities’ impulse to police their students’ speech so carefully.*⁸²

In each of these cases—the media, religious institutions, and universities—the recommendations proposed here amount to a restoration of the fundamental purposes of the institutions in question, and so in a sense a recommitment by each to its ethic. This is the course that every American institution should follow. In the simplest sense, the best way to enable Americans to rebuild their trust in institutions is for those institutions to redouble their commitment to be trustworthy. This is easier said than done, but saying it is actually an important first step to doing it, and America’s institutional leaders could do worse than to state plainly that they understand they have work to do toward regaining and again more fully deserving the public’s trust.

CONCLUSION

On the face of it, this Call to Action has proposed an enormously diverse and varied collection of recommendations in four distinct areas of American life. But in fact, its proposals are all of a piece. They aim to rouse the American people to the defense of our common way of life—to the defense of the free society and the vision of the good that underlies it. That vision is now under threat by a combination of adversaries and challenges that makes this a time of exceptional danger. But our public life is too often carried on now as though there were no such danger—as though we could afford to be frivolous and careless about how we conduct ourselves or to let division weaken us.

We cannot. America cannot afford to lose its confidence and hope. We must not fall into resentment or frustration. We must not treat politics as entertainment. Instead, we must recover responsibility in every arena of the life of our country. To engage the world with credibility, and with the popular support that is necessary in a democratic system, the United States must continue its long journey toward becoming a more perfect union, both dynamic and self-correcting, driving to offer “liberty and justice for all.” It is a time to take seriously and resist forthrightly those who would seek to distort or manipulate our democracy from abroad, a time to replenish our exhausted stores of moral capital and confidence at home, a time to remind ourselves of the ideals of our republic, and a time to help our politics better address the needs and desires of the American public *through* our free institutions and not against them.

It is, in other words, a time for civic seriousness. It is a time for action.

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