

**Political Rhetoric and Civility: A Challenge to “the Legacy of
‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness’”**

by

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*“As you stand for your values do so with gentleness and respect – that’s how we move our
country forward.”*

Mike Pence, 48th Vice President of the United States of America (2017-2021)

Abstract

Since the founding of the United States of America, political discourse has often taken an unpleasant and nasty tone. Partisan disagreement concerning public policy is normal and policy should be the subject of vigorous debate. Disagreement, bickering, and even fights on the floor of Congress, are not new phenomena. However, today there is a growing sense in the country that civility and intolerance are on the rise. This study will focus on the relationship between individual isolation, defined as “the collapse of American community” outlined by Putnam (2000), and political incivility. This collapse of the community and the subsequent rise of feelings of isolation is evident in many phases of American society today, including declines in volunteerism, attendance at organized religious worship, and social interaction between neighbors, friends, and family.

Mike Pence, 48th Vice President of the United States said, “For democracy to thrive, you have to apply a heavy dose of civility,”¹ and “democracy” was the profound “Promise of the Declaration.” This inquiry surrounding individual isolation and political incivility leads to numerous questions, including the following:

- What affect has citizen isolation had on the willingness of elected officials to compromise with members of the opposite party?
- What affect has citizen isolation had on elite civil discourse?
 - Has increased exposure to incivility merely uncovered those uncivil elements that have always been part of our discourse?
- How does partisan extremism and incivility today compare to past political eras?
- How has political rhetoric evolved since the Founding?

These and other questions lend themselves to empirical scrutiny, however, this article will explore the nexus between individual isolation and political incivility and seek to answer the question: Has negative political rhetoric increased along with individual isolation in the United States since the 1970s?

¹ Samules Brett. “Pence advocates for ‘healthy doses of civility’ as Georgetown speech draws protests,” *The Hill*, October 19, 2022.

Introduction

Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."² Jefferson took his inspiration from the seventeenth-century political philosopher John Locke who stated in *Two Treatises of Government* that "life and liberty" were two of the essential components of a political society whose sole purpose was to protect property.³ Later, Locke wrote in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that "the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness."⁴ Thus, Jefferson brought radical concepts together to throw off the yoke of oppression of a monarchy, and declare that everyone has an "inalienable" right to be a free people. Thus, the "Legacy of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" became the tradition, a way of life for a nation, and at the heart of a desire to create a "more perfect Union."

Perhaps "the Legacy of 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness'" can be more succinctly explained in one simple yet complex word: "democracy." Eric Cantor (R-VA), former House Majority Leader wrote, ". . . in a democracy, the people are the ultimate source of power. Our elected officials work for us, and they fail us when they decline to tell us truths that we, the people, don't want to hear. Even worse, they fail us when they set up false expectations we desperately want to believe."⁵ So, according to Cantor, democracy entails a tenuous contract between the governors and the governed with clear and unambiguous lines of communication. Writer and political thinker Philip Wylie wrote in *Generation of Vipers*, "To the man and the woman who understand the philosophy of democracy and live by it, there is never any confusion about how to feel or what to do. Such people know that the confusions are superficial, that a thousand democracies could perish, but that democracy would prevail in the end."⁶

Political Rhetoric

Since America's founding, political discourse has been vigorous and has often taken an unpleasant and nasty tone. Partisan disagreement concerning political beliefs and public policy is normal and should be the subject of vigorous debate, however, the debate, at times, has become rancorous and has affected the political behavior of all Americans. Disagreement and bickering between elected officials of the various political parties have often been emblematic of the electorate. At times, the tone has

² Declaration of Independence

³ Locke, John. *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1887.

⁴ Locke, John, 1632-1704. "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," [Place of publication not identified], WLC.

⁵ Cantor

⁶ Wylie, P. *Generation of Vipers*. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1942.

even led to violent acts on the floor of Congress, for example, two of the most famous acts of violence there are: Senator Henry S. Foote (D-MS) pulling a pistol on Senator Thomas Hart Benton (D-MO) during an intense debate concerning slavery in 1850, and the caning of Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) by Congressman Preston Brooks (D-SC) in 1856. While these types of incidents are more the exception than the rule, today there is a growing sense in the United States that incivility and intolerance are on the rise, driving what Wylie described as “confusion about how to feel or what to do.”⁷ Intolerance often leads to incivility, which seems to be driven by a confusion of emotions that are exacerbated when individuals become isolated because of what Harvard University scholar Robert D. Putnam (2000) described as the collapse of American community.⁸

Putnam’s American Community

In its most basic form, community is defined as a group of people who live in a certain place or have a certain thread of commonality, for example the citizens of the United States of America. The definition of community can be further narrowed based on demographics such as geographic location, race, religious beliefs or affiliation, generation, hobbies and interests, causes, and political affiliation. At the core of communities are terms like volunteerism, partnership, and friendship. Since the 1970s there has been a continuous collapse of community, as Americans disengage from numerous phases of community, including volunteerism, the decline in organized religious worship and participation, and in social interaction between neighbors, friends, and family. According to Putnam, “By almost every measure, Americans’ direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education--the best individual-level predictor of political participation--have risen sharply throughout this period. Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities.”⁹

Senator Ben Sasse (R-NE) wrote, “Putnam noted long ago that as membership in social clubs dropped, so did socializing with friends. People stopped having friends over for dinner. Between 1975 and 1999, the average number of times Americans reported entertaining at home annually fell by nearly half.”¹⁰

Simultaneously occurring with the collapse of the “community,” the United States has seen the rise and intensification of partisanship, extremism, and isolation. This isolation can also be seen in our turn away from religious institutions. Putnam wrote, “Religious affiliation is by far the most common associational membership among Americans. Indeed, by many measures America continues to be (even more than in Tocqueville’s time) an astonishingly “churched” society. For example, the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any other nation on Earth. Yet religious sentiment in America seems to be becoming somewhat less tied to institutions

⁷ Wylie, p. 306

⁸ Putnam, 2000

⁹ Putnam, 2000.

¹⁰ Sasse, Ben. *Them – Why We Hate Each Other, and How to Heal*. New York: St. Martins’ Press, 2018, p. 27.

and more self-defined.”¹⁰ As we isolate ourselves, we can begin to dehumanize anyone with opposing views. Levitsky and Ziblatt wrote:

When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred. Parties come to view each other not as legitimate rivals, but as dangerous enemies. Losing ceases to be an accepted part of the political process and instead becomes a catastrophe.¹¹

As the community has collapsed, individual isolation has taken its place. To preserve “The Promise of the Declaration: Building on the Legacy of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” the citizens of the United States must reverse Putnam’s sentiment, “Americans seem to have stopped believing that we are all in this together. The only way the American democracy model survives is through the mutual commitment to unity. In our analysis, we seek to determine whether or not political rhetoric has become more negative as we as Americans have become more isolated. In the section below, we present our preliminary findings.

Methods

Trust and Isolation

For the purposes of this study, measures of individual trust as a proxy for isolation were used. Past scholars have asserted that trust in others decreases as feelings of isolation increase.^{12,13} Putnam’s analysis also recognizes that lack of trust comes from a decline in social capital, or an increase in isolation.¹⁴ Trust is also a key necessary component of social capital, which “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁵ The measure of trust is taken from the GSS Survey’s question, “Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” This question has been asked about every other year from 1974 to 2018.

¹¹ Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt, “How Wobbly Is Our Democracy?”, *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/democracy-polarization.html>.

¹² Nyqvist, Fredrica, Christina R. Victor, Anna K. Forsman, and Mirna Cattani, “The association between social capital and loneliness in different age groups: a population-based study in Western Finland.” *BMC Public Health*, 16(1) (2016).

¹³ Yang, Jie and Sara M. Moorman. “Beyond the Individual: Evidence Linking Neighborhood Trust and Social Isolation Among Community-Dwelling Older Adults.” *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 92(1) (2019): 22-39.

¹⁴ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

¹⁵ Putnam, 2000, p. 19

Political Elite Incivility

For our initial attempt to measure incivility among political elites, we have chosen to study Presidential speech in two different areas – State of the Union Addresses and interviews. We typically think of State of the Unions as pep rallies for the President’s political party, so we would expect the overall tone of these speeches to be positive. Press interviews, on the other hand, could be positive or negative depending on the media outlet and events occurring in the country.

The text of these speeches and interviews were obtained from The American Presidency Project,¹⁶ which contains archived documents, speeches, interviews, fireside chats, and other data going back to President George Washington.¹⁷ We gathered every State of the Union Address from President Ford’s 1975 address to President Biden’s 2022 address in keeping with the years for which we have trust data. We then gathered the transcripts of all Presidential interviews with major U.S. networks for that same time period. We used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Software (LIWC-22) to analyze the emotional tone of each speech or interview. According to LIWC-22, “Although LIWC-22 includes both positive tone and negative tone dimensions, the Tone variable puts the two dimensions into a single summary variable. The algorithm is built so that the higher the number, the more positive the tone. Numbers below 50 suggest a more negative emotional tone.”¹⁸

Findings

Distrust

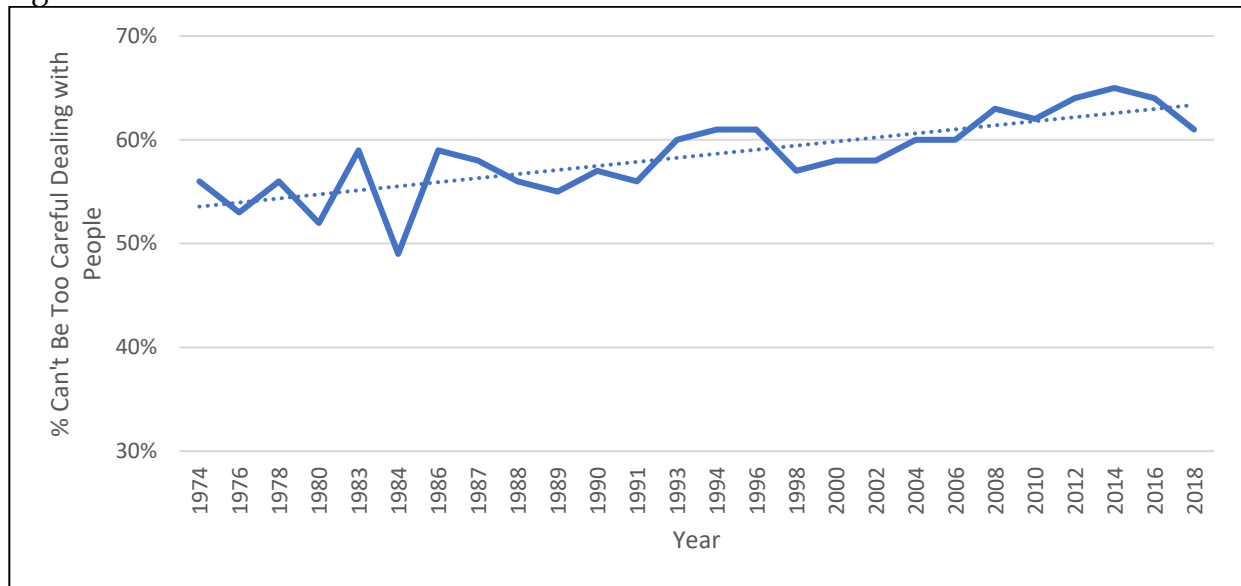
Figure one indicates that, over the last 50 years, the number of people who lack trust in their fellow man is increasing. While the GSS survey data stops at 2018, we have no reason to believe that this trend has altered course in the last five years. The scale of Figure 1 has been adjusted to better demonstrate the trend over time. While the overall increase in distrust may seem minor – a mere 10% increase over the last 50 years – we assert that this seemingly small trend is detrimental to any society as we lose the ability to see each other as fellow humans and become much more “us versus them” in our thinking and actions.

¹⁶ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses>

¹⁷ Incidentally, this free database also includes all of President Donald Trump’s Tweets from 2015-2021.

¹⁸ LIWC Analysis

Figure 1: Distrust Over Time



Presidential Tone

Figure 2 represents the emotional tone of every State of the Union address since 1974. Higher values of tone, as defined by LIWC-22, indicate more positive overall tone, while lower numbers indicate more negative tone. Values less than 50% indicate an overall negative tone to the interview. As previously stated, we expect to find an overall positive tone to State of the Union addresses, given their audience and purpose. Typically, these addresses are an opportunity for the President to tout successes of the previous year and present an agenda for the upcoming year.

Figure 2 shows a trend of decreasing tone over time. We conducted a correlational analysis of tone and time, and found that there is a significant negative correlation between emotional tone of the State of the Union and the year ($r = -0.35$, $p < .024$). As time has passed, State of the Union addresses have gotten significantly more negative.

Figure 2: Presidential State of the Union Tone

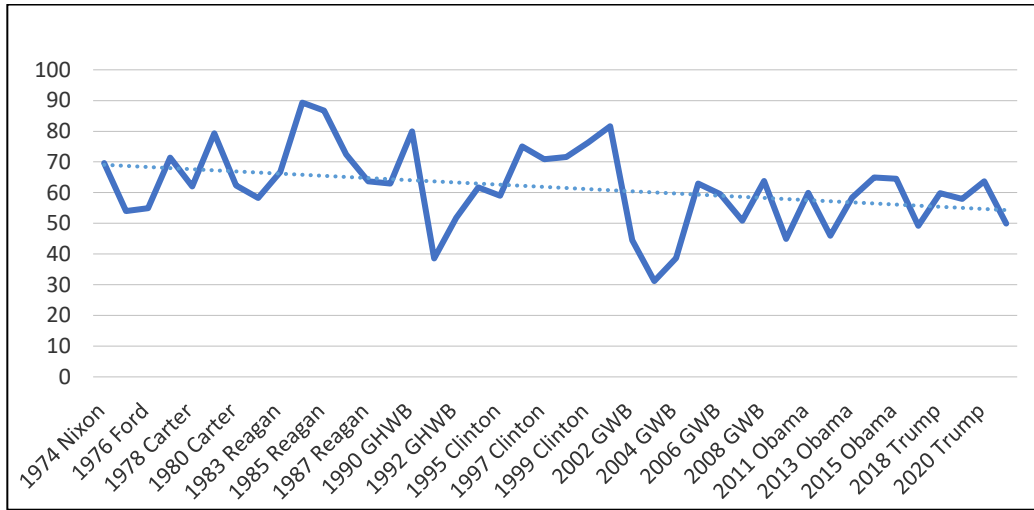
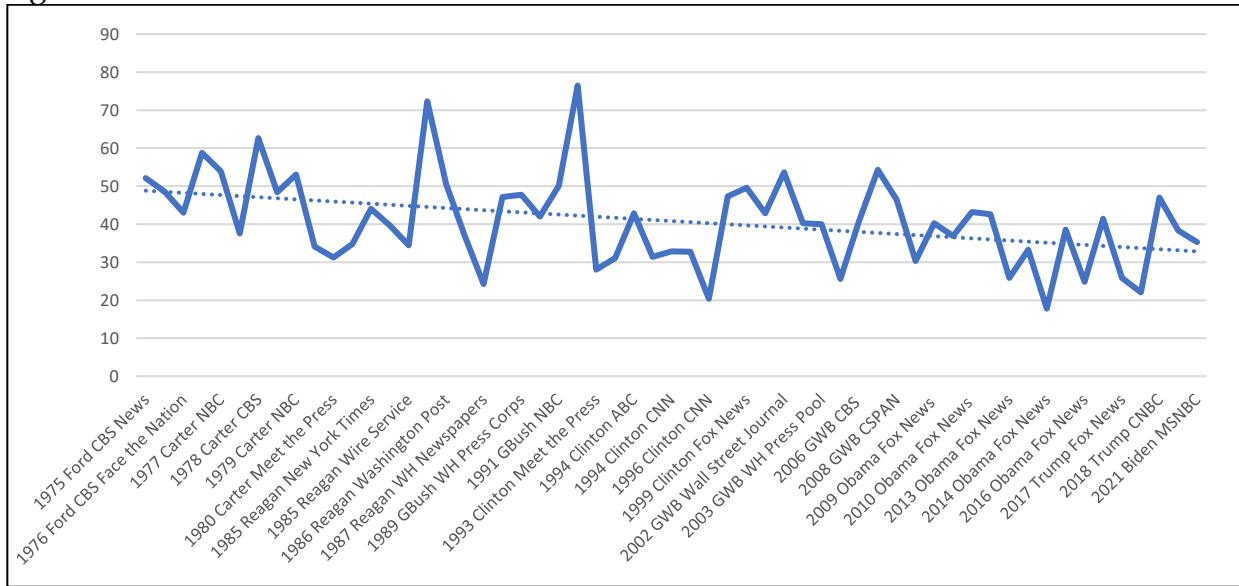


Figure 3 below represents the overall tone of major network Presidential interviews since 1975. Interviews before 1996 generally represent the three major news networks – ABC, NBC, and CBS – along with some news magazines and newspaper reporters. Fox News launched in 1996, and Neil Cavuto conducted the first presidential interview of President Bill Clinton for Fox in 1999. Fox News has interviewed every president since, with the exception of current President Joe Biden, who has only conducted one network interview with MSNBC. The graph shows a trend of decreasing emotional tone over time.

We also conducted a correlational analysis of interview tone over time. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis revealed almost identical results to State of the Union tone. There is a significant negative correlation between emotional tone of the interviews and the year ($r = -0.39, p < .003$). As time has passed, interview tones have gotten significantly more negative.

Figure 3: Presidential Interview Tone



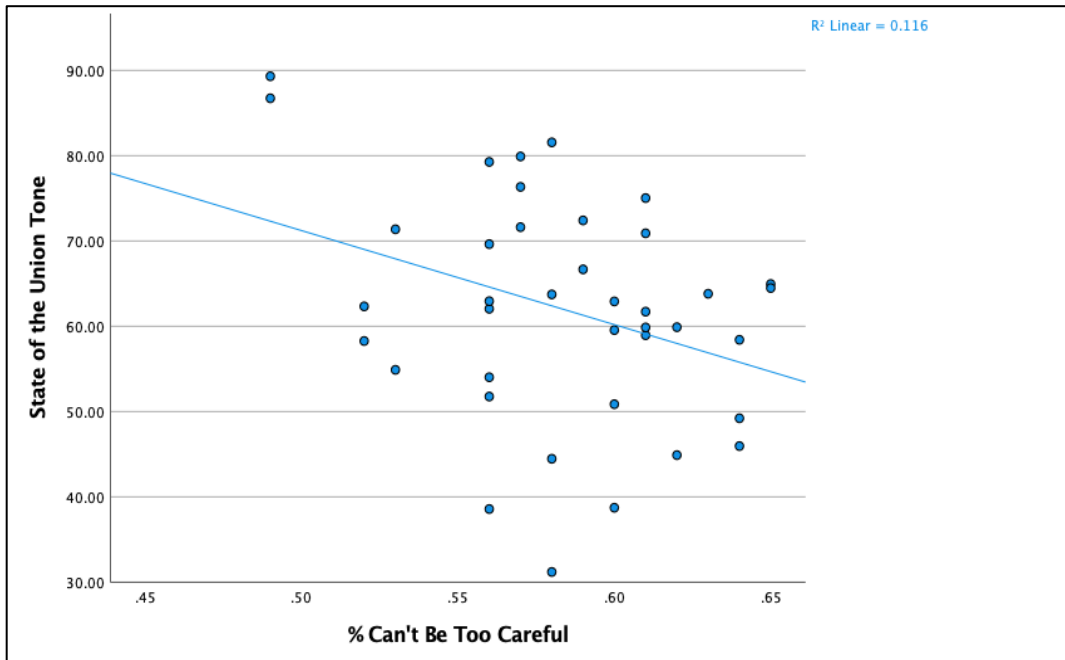
Our preliminary analysis indicates small but significant changes in negativity over time, both in State of the Union addresses and in major network interviews. While we do not attempt here to measure the negativity of other outlets like social media, we must at least acknowledge that informal mediums like Twitter and Facebook are not known as bastions of positivity and social connectedness, and thus we can easily assume that the trend toward incivility is actually greater than we see here.

Distrust and Emotional Tone

The final step in our preliminary analysis is to consider whether individual levels of distrust and the emotional tone of presidential speeches and interviews are correlated. We find significant correlations in both speeches and interviews. Admittedly, there are a variety of other factors that could play a role in the tone of an address or an interview. War status, proximity of the next election, divided government, and the economy are just a few variables that likely play a role as well, and are variables we can add to our model in the future.

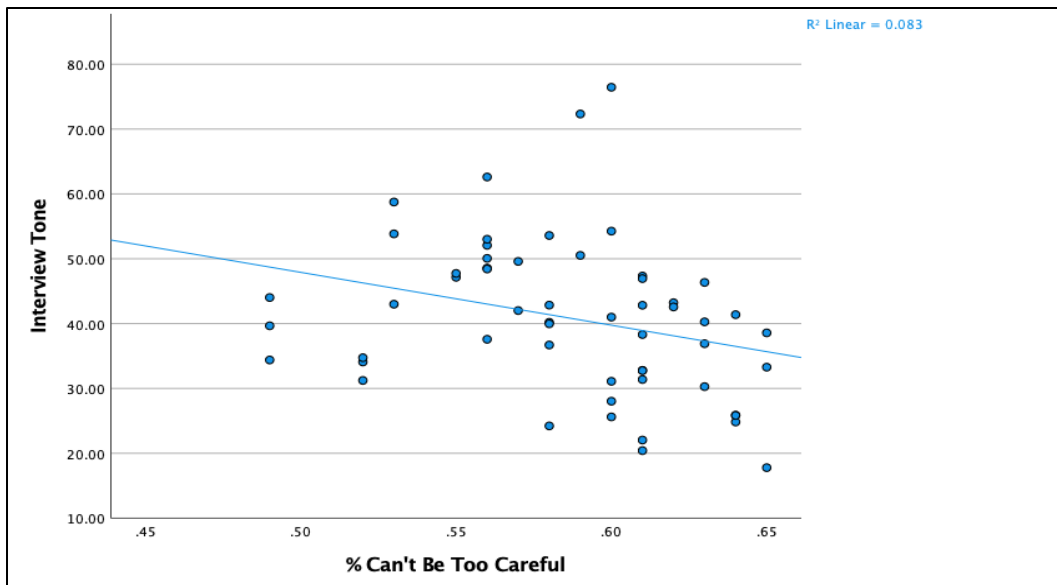
However, Figure 4 indicates that there is a significant correlation between distrust and the tone of the State of the Union. Our distrust variable here explains almost 12% of the variance in State of the Union tone.

Figure 4: State of the Union Tone and Distrust



Again, we find similar results when we consider the relationship between interview tone and distrust. There is a significant correlation between interview tone and distrust, and we find that about 8% of the variance in interview tone can be explained by individual citizen distrust.

Figure 5: Presidential Interviews and Distrust



The purpose of this paper is exploratory in nature. We set out to determine if a relationship exists between the rhetoric politicians use, measured here by emotional tone, and general levels of distrust and disconnectedness among the American people. We have found evidence of a relationship, both using State of the Union addresses and media interviews. The next step is to determine what other variables may affect the tone of a presidential speech, and then to conduct regression analysis to determine the specific influence of distrust on political rhetoric.

Isolation is a by-product of the collapse of the community, and negative political rhetoric may well be a by-product of the echo chambers caused by isolation. The Bible warns of this in 2 Timothy 2:16: "But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness." A person cannot recognize or deal with the truth correctly unless they stay away from spiritual battles or disputes with false teachers, who are most likely focused on ideas that are shallow and unspiritual. The only way the American democracy model survives is through the mutual commitment of unity. Wylie wrote, "A new corollary of truth is never evident at once to the masses... That is why a person who does not do everything in his power to find out about both sides of a question, and all candidates, is digging the grave of his liberty."¹⁹ These words are as true today as they were when they were written in 1942, and thus remain relevant today as a requirement to preserve the Legacy of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

¹⁹ Wylie, p. 307.

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