

U.S. Leadership in Turbulent Times: Considering the Legacy of Frank Church

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Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. I'm honored to be here today to deliver a lecture on behalf of the Frank Church Institute.

As you know, Elizabeth and I recently moved to Boise. We moved here in July from Washington, DC with our 15-month-old son. We've already experienced an exceedingly warm welcome. We've started to get to know the community. And we've also had the opportunity to travel around the state – to Ketchum and Sun Valley, McCall, Stanley and the Sawtooths, and of course the Bethine and Frank Church Scenic Overlook.

Idaho is stunning and we feel very lucky to live in such a magnificent state.

Today I want to talk about public leadership in a time of great turbulence and uncertainty.

There have been other moments in our nation's history when we have grappled with large and difficult questions about our future. But I think what makes this moment especially unique is that events are moving more quickly and in a more disorienting fashion than we've ever seen before.

As I was looking through the Frank Church archives, I came across a joke he occasionally told: "There's a story of an airline pilot who announced to his passengers that he had two pieces of news for them, one bad and the other good. The bad news," he said, "is that we are lost. The good news is that we are traveling at a record-breaking rate of speed!"¹

This feels appropriate for our time.

For those with a college education and live in a city, life is pretty good. Innovation is moving at a rapid pace. Self-driving cars are around the corner. Algorithms can predict when a customer is ready to buy a new product, when a jet engine needs servicing, or if a person may be at risk for a disease.² Unemployment is low, housing prices have recovered, median income is rising, and health outcomes are improving.

¹ Frank Church. "The Torment in the Land." Address, Washington, D.C., February 21, 1968.

² "The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data," *The Economist*, May 6, 2017.

³ <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21721656-data-economy-demands-new-approach-antitrust-rules-worlds-most-valuable-resource>.

On the other hand, in the face of rapid and overwhelming economic, social and technological change, cultural retrenchment is also taking hold. Blue-collar work is disappearing. A high school education brings little beyond service industry jobs. Identity politics and polarization are growing. Many communities – especially those in more isolated and rural areas – are fearful and mistrusting of the future.

This spring and summer, we witnessed neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching by torchlight through southern college towns. We've seen skirmishes break out across the country, from Berkeley to Boston. We've watched right-wing militia members square off against black bloc anarchists.³

But this turbulence is not limited to political volatility. Our environment is changing in alarming and disturbing ways.

Take this past summer. I remember waking up in June to the following headline: “An Iceberg the Size of Delaware Just Broke Away from Antarctica.”⁴ The warnings are coming at a dizzying pace. Permafrost in Alaska that is thawing. Fires burning across Greenland at a rate unmatched in 10,000 years.⁵ Here in Idaho, we're living with our own version of climate change. July was the second hottest summer on record, with 32 consecutive days above 90 degrees.⁶ And just as the heat started to ease, we confronted an unprecedented fire season that rained ash on Portland, and brought purple air quality warnings to the Treasure Valley.

Every five years, the National Intelligence Council comes out with a strategic futures report that looks 20 years ahead. The title of the most recent report is the “Paradox of Progress.”⁷ It notes how fragile our achievements are – that our progress has also spawned major shocks: the Arab Spring, 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the resurgence of populism.⁸

While humans are more interconnected, empowered, and prosperous than ever before, glaring differences over ideas and identity are increasing. And the human impact on the planet is catching up to us.

What does this portend for the United States?

³ Elle Reeve, *Charlottesville: Race and Terror*, television, VICE News, August 21, 2017. <https://news.vice.com/story/vice-news-tonight-full-episode-charlottesville-race-and-terror>

⁴ Jugal Patel and Justin Gillis, “An Iceberg the Size of Delaware Just Broke Away From Antarctica,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2107. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/09/climate/antarctica-rift-update.html?mcubz=1>

⁵ Henry Fountain, “Alaska’s Permafrost is Thawing,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/23/climate/alaska-permafrost-thawing.html?mcubz=1>

⁶ Michael Katz, “Heat Spell Continues: July Was the Second-Warmest Month on Record for Boise,” *Idaho Statesman*, August 1, 2017. <http://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/article164812612.html>

⁷ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, Washington, D.C.: Director of National Intelligence, 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

The subject I want to address today is U.S. leadership. It's a topic that I have given a lot of thought to, ever since I left public service in January of this year.

I am concerned that we are facing a vacuum in leadership at the precise moment we need it the most. Those who are in charge – starting with President Donald Trump – are deliberately steering the country in a reckless and dangerous manner. We are actively embracing destructive policies that are hemorrhaging our future.

In a speech Frank Church gave in Sun Valley in 1972, he decried “Too many status quo politicians...driving right down the middle of the road.” He lambasted the establishment for being unwilling to deal with the real problems in America – the “denial of equal treatment on account of race and sex,” a “pointless and prideful war,” economic inequality, and little progress cleaning up the environment and dealing with pollution.⁹

The ruptures and divisions Church identified in 1972 resonate clearly today.

I would like to lay out three challenges that require exceptional leadership – if not from within our government than from our broader citizenry:

- The erosion of public trust in U.S. democracy.
- The onset of rapid environmental disruption brought on by climate change.
- The startling diminishment of U.S. standing in the world – which puts our interests and national security at risk.

First, the erosion of public trust in U.S. democracy.

Democracy in the U.S. is under duress, and the data is troubling.

The Pew Foundation has conducted “trust in government” surveys since 1958. In 1958, approximately three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost all of the time. Starting in the 1960s that trust in government started to erode. Since 2007, the share of Americans who say they can trust the government has not once surpassed 30%. The most recent results – from April of this year – show that confidence in the government stands at 20%, near a historic low.¹⁰

The alienation of younger generations is not a new phenomenon. At the height of the uproar over the Vietnam War, Church observed:

⁹ Frank Church, "George McGovern for President." Address, Sun Valley, Idaho, June 16, 1972.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017,” May 3, 2017. <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/>. The public’s dissatisfaction extends to Congress, which exhibits an August 2017 approval rating of 16%. This is higher than its 9% approval following the 2013 government shutdown, but still represents a near-bottom. Gallup News, “Congress and the Public,” August 2017. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>.

We are left confronted with the indisputable fact that a substantial proportion of our college students are estranged; they portray a poignant, visceral sense of alienation toward the ‘establishment,’ by which they mean all authority that stands for, or somehow represents, the government.¹¹

But this moment feels different.

For one, we are not involved in a conflict like Vietnam, where the government drafted thousands of unwilling young Americans to fight in a war they didn’t believe in.

The prevailing sentiment among younger generations today seems to skew more towards distrust and cynicism rather than outrage. Younger generations decreasingly believe that the government and its institutions are working in their best interests. They are opting out.

So why have our citizens lost confidence in democracy?

Experts have several theories.

One line of argument contends that the public has become disillusioned by the vast sums of money influencing politics. They have a point. Direct political spending at the federal level represented, at a bare minimum, \$16 billion during the recent election cycle. About \$6.4 billion was spent on elections. Another \$6.4 billion went towards lobbying the federal government. The remaining \$3.2 billion funded partisan think-tanks and advertising on political TV shows.¹²

Others contend that economic disruption, particularly economic inequality, has undermined people’s faith in democracy to solve deep-rooted problems. Changing migration patterns and shifting demographics have upended many communities, causing them to turn inward to slow the pace of change.

What is undeniable is that public indices of disenchantment – including the growing popularity of anti-establishment parties – are on the rise. One alarming study found that among young Americans, the proportion who expressed approval for “army rule,” as opposed to democracy, rose from one in sixteen in 1995, to 1 in 6 in the most recent survey.¹³

¹¹ Frank Church, “Torment in the Land.”

¹² Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter, “Why Competition in the Politics Industry Is Failing America,” *Harvard Business School*, September 2017. http://www.hbs.edu/competitiveness/Documents/why-competition-in-the-politics-industry-is-failing-america.pdf?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=op-stories. In addition, the report notes that the number of laws Congress has enacted has declined sharply, from over 750 in 1973-74, to only 329 in 2015-16. The 114th Congress in 2015-16 also represented startling division. Only 11% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans in the House were deemed moderates, compared to 60% of both Republicans and Democrats in 1951.

¹³ Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (July 2016): 5–17. While some scholars have quibbled about the quality of the

As identity politics have taken root, this has led to a corresponding erosion of traditions of tolerance and diversity. The Southern Poverty Law Center calls 2016 “an unprecedented year for hate.” The statistics back up that assertion. The number of anti-Muslim hate groups tripled last year, from 34 to 101. The number of hate crimes against Muslims spiked 67 percent in that same period.¹⁴

Likewise, America’s view on immigrants and refugees is also changing.

Consider for a moment that over 65 million people are currently displaced through war and conflict. 22.5 million of them are officially classified as refugees, who are seeking safety across international borders. Over half this number are children. This represents the largest displacement since World War II.¹⁵

Yet, the U.S. is slashing the number of admitted refugees.

The latest proposal from Trump would drop levels below 50,000. I fail to understand this logic. The line from the White House is that our country cannot afford the economic cost of refugees. But the *New York Times* reports that the administration suppressed a study from the Department of Health and Human Services which found that refugees brought in \$63 billion more in government revenue over the past decade than they cost.¹⁶

If cost isn’t the real issue, what is?

Under President Obama, the refugee cap stood at 110,000. In my opinion, 110,000 was shamefully low. We should have tripled that number. And that still would not have been enough. Countries like Germany and Sweden are shouldering much heavier burdens. In 2015 alone, Germany took in nearly 890,000 refugees.¹⁷

Of course, that is not to mention Trump’s decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, betraying the hopes and dreams of 800,000 young people who, as President Obama put it, “are here through no fault of their own, who pose no threat, who are not taking away anything from the rest of us.”¹⁸

underlying data, most agree that the millennial generation is increasingly interested in non-democratic alternatives, and have markedly less confidence in democratic systems.

¹⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right,” February 15, 2017. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>

¹⁵ UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement In 2016,” 2017. <http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/>

¹⁶ Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Somini Sengupta, “Trump Administration Rejects Study That Shows Positive Impact of Refugees,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html>

¹⁷ “Sharp Drop In Migrant Arrivals in Germany,” *DW*, January 11, 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/sharp-drop-in-migrant-arrivals-in-germany/a-37087543>

¹⁸ President Obama’s Facebook page, accessed September 17, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/barackobama/posts/10155227588436749>

The next challenge we face relates to environmental disruption brought on by climate change.

Last month, we met a group of friends in Stanley. They had first flown to Bozeman to attend a wedding. Afterwards, they drove from Montana over the Bridger Mountains into Idaho. As they talked about their trip, they described acres upon acres of dead forest. Trees that had been stripped of all foliage. Leaves that had an eerie reddish-brown hue to them. We were stunned by this description. I did a little research. It turns out that my friends had witnessed the effects of the mountain pine beetle.

Since the 1990s more than 60 million acres of pine forest, from New Mexico to British Columbia, have suffered die-offs. Three quarters of the mature white bark pines in Yellowstone are dead because of the beetles. British Columbia is the latest area to fall victim. By the time the epidemic ends, 60 percent of its pines may be dead, totaling a billion cubic meters of wood.¹⁹

What has spurred the pine beetle? Rising temperatures brought on by climate change have simultaneously boosted the beetles' population, and weakened trees through drought. Accordingly, the trees are unable to withstand this insect invasion.

This is just one example of the cataclysmic environmental changes occurring around the world. And yet our politicians are willfully denying that the U.S. has any role or responsibility for confronting climate change. In a classic case of psychic numbing, we are burying our heads in the sand and wishing away the problem.

Take Trump's treatment of the Paris Climate Accord. The agreement itself is relatively weak. It is non-binding, doesn't go far enough to limit rises in temperature, and leaves it to individual countries to make hard choices.

It is necessary – but it is not sufficient.

The right thing to do would be to endorse the accord but commit to bolder steps. Instead, Trump has chosen to abandon the agreement – a treaty endorsed by every country around the world, save Nicaragua and Syria – at a critical juncture. Towards what end?

In fact, it is worth asking how climate change became such a political issue in the first place. How did something as basic as ensuring our children have fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, and a habitable environment to live in – turn partisan?

Back in the 2007 election, the republican nominee - Senator John McCain - ran on climate credentials that were stronger than Barack Obama's. But after the republicans lost the election, the ground shifted. A big impetus for this shift was triggered by the fossil fuel industry, notably Kansas billionaires Charles and David Koch. They came up with a deviously brilliant strategy with one goal in mind: take the science out of climate and turn

¹⁹ Hillary Rosner, "Pine Beetle Epidemic," *National Geographic*, April 2015.
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/pine-beetles/rosner-text>

it into a political issue. They ran attack ads. They made well-timed and generous campaign donations. They selectively targeted vulnerable incumbents in coal states.²⁰ Their tactics succeeded, despite scientific consensus that concretely links the planet's warming to human activity, including extraordinary fires in the western states, and five hundred year hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean.

Nonetheless, public opinion has shifted. 7 in 10 Americans support strict carbon limits on coal-fired power plants. Large majorities believe climate change will harm Americans (just not themselves).²¹ Yet the oil and gas lobby continues to prevail, and has made speaking out on climate change politically dangerous.

In contrast, fighting to protect millions of acres of wilderness was a major legacy for Frank Church. He led the passage of three major environmental bills: the Wilderness Act of 1965, the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1974, and the Endangered American Wilderness Act of 1978. Working hand-in-hand with another Idaho icon, the late governor Cecil Andrus, they successfully set aside millions of acres of protected land in Central Idaho.

I think this quote from Frank Church about the importance of preserving the wilderness is as relevant today as it was in 1977:

Though we tend to feel that we are presently the owners of this country, we are not, in any true philosophical sense. We are the trustees of this country for a little time only... I never knew a man who took a bedroll onto an Idaho mountain-side and slept there under a star-studded summer sky who felt self-important the next morning. Unless we preserve some opportunity for future generations to have the same experience we shall have dishonored our trust to posterity.²²

Diminishment of U.S. standing in the world

The third issue I'd like to discuss is the decreasing stature and influence of the U.S. on the world stage.

Recently, on September 19, Trump took the podium at the UN and promised to "totally destroy" North Korea, crush loser terrorists, and decried that major parts of the world "are going to hell."²³ To hear the president of the United States use such language in a formal setting in front of world leaders was disturbing.

²⁰ Coral Davenport and Eric Lipton, "How G.O.P. Leaders Came to View Climate Change As Fake Science," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/us/politics/republican-leaders-climate-change.html?mcubz=1>

²¹ Nadja Popovich, John Schwartz and Tatiana Schlossberg, "How Americans Think About Climate Change, in Six Maps," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/21/climate/how-americans-think-about-climate-change-in-six-maps.html?_r=0

²² Frank Church, "Endangered Wilderness Act of 1977," remarks, Washington, D.C. March 30, 1977.

²³ "Full Text: Trump's 2017 U.N. Speech Transcript," *Politico*, September 19, 2017.

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/trump-un-speech-2017-full-text-transcript-242879>

The United States has traditionally stood for something greater than merely preserving power or pursuing economic interests. Our founding principles—that citizens have the right to express themselves, associate freely, worship as they choose, and participate in their political systems—have inspired people globally. In fact, advancing democracy and protecting human rights are at the heart of American soft power.²⁴

When Joe Nye coined the term soft power in 1990, he observed: “if a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes.”²⁵

In other words, protecting human rights and advancing democracy are not only moral imperatives; they are key aspects of U.S. power and legitimacy. These values provide Washington with the credibility to persuade other countries to follow its lead and conform to its interests without resorting to force.

Frank Church recognized this principle as well, saying:

The greatest danger to our democracy, I daresay, is not that the communists will destroy it, but that we will betray it by the very means chosen to defend it. Foreign policy is not and cannot be permitted to become an end in itself. It is rather a means toward an end, which in our case is not only the safety of the United States but the preservation of her democratic values.²⁶

What have we seen so far under President Trump?

First, human rights are out, authoritarians and dictators are in. Trump’s first visit abroad was not to a western liberal ally. He chose to stop in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with an appalling human rights record. The Saudis are leading a bombing campaign in Yemen that has struck hospitals and schools, and killed scores of innocent civilians, potentially amounting to war crimes.

He has met with Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte and offered him a White House invitation. Since Duterte assumed office, he has unleashed death squads under the guise of fighting narcotics. Thus far, over 7,000 people have been killed in his campaign.²⁷

Trump has welcomed Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the White House. Al-Sisi has authorized a brutal crackdown by his security forces involving mass incarceration, torture, enforced disappearances, and extra-judicial killings.²⁸

²⁴ Steve Feldstein, “Trump’s Reckless and Dangerous Plan to Abandon Values in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *World Politics Review*, March 15, 2017. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/21528/trump-s-reckless-and-dangerous-plan-to-abandon-values-in-u-s-foreign-policy>

²⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* No. 80, Twentieth Anniversary (Autumn, 1990), pp. 153-171.

²⁶ Frank Church. “Revolution and World Order.” Address, Washington, D.C. February 6, 1969.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Philippines: Duterte’s First Year a Human Rights Calamity,” June 28, 20. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/28/philippines-dutertes-first-year-human-rights-calamity>

But we are not just embracing rogues and dictators. In the fight against ISIS we have taken military actions that are raising alarm bells.

For example, civilian casualties in Syria and Iraq due to coalition air strikes are on pace to double under Trump. Through July, U.S. bombings and air strikes have killed over 2,200 civilians.²⁹ We are not talking about the legitimate deaths of enemy combatants and terrorists. Those killed are innocent children, families, and ordinary people who have been struck by U.S. bombs. While some level of civilian harm is an inevitable byproduct of war, a doubling of civilian deaths, month after month, indicates a more sinister pattern.

This matters because killing civilians is morally unacceptable and violates international humanitarian law. Killing civilians is strategically self-defeating. It turns populations against us and makes victory harder to achieve. Killing civilians undermines our global standing – it alienates allies and foreign publics, undercuts our legitimacy, and undermines our influence.

Second, our inconsistency and abdication of leadership at key moments this year have stunned our allies.

When Trump announced that the U.S. would leave the Paris Climate Accords, this was not only damaging from an environmental perspective. It also signaled to the world that 70 years of international leadership were suddenly up for debate.

In Trump's UN speech, he emphasized the concept of national sovereignty 21 times, and reinforced his desire to take care of his own people rather than worry about the rest of the world.³⁰ It has not helped matters that Trump refused for months to reaffirm Article 5 in NATO, the core tenet relating to collective defense.

Unsurprisingly, foreign leaders are increasingly vocal in their criticisms of U.S. leadership. After the events in Charlottesville and Trump's equivocation about who was responsible for the violence, German PM Angela Merkel did not mince words: "It is racist, far-right violence and clear, forceful action must be taken against it, regardless of where in the world it happens." Clearly alluding to Trump, she reprimanded: "what needs

²⁸ Amnesty International, "Egypt 2016/2017," 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/report-egypt/>

²⁹ Samuel Oakford, "Trump's Air War Has Already Killed More Than 2,000 Civilians," *Daily Beast*, July 17, 2017. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/president-trumps-air-war-kills-12-civilians-per-day>

³⁰ David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, "In U.N. Speech, Trump Threatens to 'Totally Destroy North Korea' and Calls Him Kim Jong Un 'Rocket Man,'" *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/19/in-u-n-speech-trump-warns-that-the-world-faces-great-peril-from-rogue-regimes-in-north-korea-iran/?utm_term=.36e87c11ac6a&wpisrc=nl_todayworld&wpmm=1

to be condemned is any form of violence, especially any forms of extreme or aggressive violence.”³¹

Third, as a result, our influence and stature on the world stage is markedly declining.

Alliances take years to build, but can be squandered in months. Especially in the age of Twitter. Eliot Cohen, a former republican official, offers a blistering critique:

Already, [foreign leaders] have begun to reshape alliances and reconfigure the networks that make up the global economy, bypassing the United States and diminishing its standing. . . In almost every region of the world, the [Trump] administration has already left a mark, by blunder, inattention, miscomprehension, or willfulness.³²

I don't assume that Trump is willing or interested in shifting course. I expect more fumbling and more ineptitude under his watch. And I truly hope our country doesn't face a crisis of existential proportions. I do not believe that Trump has the temperament or intellect to make the right decision with millions of lives at stake.

But I also worry that over the long-term, the damage will not be easy to overcome.

As Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland put it: “The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course.”³³ Trump's actions and words will reverberate for years to come.

For our allies – who have spent more than half a century basing their identity and core national policies on America's promise of open-ended support – Trump's election raises profound questions. Are ordinary Americans no longer committed to advancing democratic values and upholding liberal alliances? Can the United States truly be relied upon in the future?

So what can we do? How to we lead without a viable leader

We need to be clear-eyed and realistic about where things stand. We are not capable of providing consistent, credible leadership under Trump. Another country, perhaps Germany, will have to assume this mantle until we get our act together.

That could be in four years, or it could be longer.

³¹ Melissa Eddy, “Angela Merkel Condemns Charlottesville Violence As ‘Racist’ and ‘Evil,’” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/world/europe/charlottesville-far-right-trump-merkel.html?mcubz=1>

³² Eliot A. Cohen, “How Trump Is Ending the American Era,” *The Atlantic*, October 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/is-trump-ending-the-american-era/537888/>

³³ David Ljunggren, “Canada Seeks Larger World Role as U.S. Retreats: Foreign Minister,” *Reuters*, June 6, 2017. <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKBN18X20M-OCATP>

But we are too great a country with too much at stake to simply sit on the sidelines. The effects of climate change will only get worse. The fraying of our democracy will only deepen.

The virtue of a democracy is that one person, even someone as powerful as the president, cannot supplant the diversity, knowledge, and compassion of our broader population. I believe there are many actions we can undertake as individuals, both locally and nationally, that can make a difference.

As a starting point, we should reaffirm the centrality of knowledge and evidence to our discourse.

A recent Foreign Affairs article - “How America Lost Faith in Expertise” – observes:

The bigger concern today is that Americans have reached a point where ignorance...is seen as an actual virtue. To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to demonstrate their independence from nefarious elites—and insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they’re wrong.”³⁴

This has manifested itself in countless harmful ways.

The anti-vaccine movement is a good case in point. Climate change denialism is another. Part of the problem is that people are less interested in evidence, and more focused on rejecting vaccines or denying climate change because it “expresses who they are.”³⁵

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous line – “you’re entitled to your own opinion but you are not entitled to your own facts” – is even more salient in these divided times.

Second, we must hold our politicians, representatives and government agencies accountable.

I am certain you have heard this before, but it is important to emphasize our individual civic responsibility. We must remember it every day, and act on it.

Our constitution provides numerous checks and balances on power. The president represents but one level of authority. There is an even greater imperative to press our congressmen and senators to be vigorous in their oversight, to push back against bad policies, and to call out the president when he says something irresponsible, or does something reckless.

³⁴ To Nichols, “How America Lost Faith in Expertise,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-02-13/how-america-lost-faith-expertise>

³⁵ Amy Harmon, “Climate Science Meets a Stubborn Obstacle: Students,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/04/us/education-climate-change-science-class-students.html?mcubz=1&_r=0

We cannot give in to apathy and indifference. I worry about younger generations that are moving away from public service and civic engagement. We have many problems that require urgent attention, and we will not solve them by turning inwards and hiding in smartphones and social media feeds.

Citizens must get involved. Attend city council meetings. Run for office. Volunteer for a local refugee resettlement organization. Attend a protest. Attend another protest. Write to your senator. Go to one of their town hall meetings. Make your voice heard.

Let me provide a couple concrete examples of ways you can make a difference. Right after you leave this lecture.

I learned last week – at the Idaho Environmental Forum – about a proposal from Canadian mining company Midas Gold to dig an open pit mine under the riverbed of the East Fork South Fork headwaters of the Salmon River. The potential effects are chilling. This small area provides the most important remaining habitat for summer Chinook salmon in the Columbia River basin. The project – if approved – would destroy a bull trout spawning area, and store toxic mine tailings in a dam right on the river.³⁶

This is where the fight begins – in our own backyard.

Frank Church spent years of his life struggling to protect Idaho’s wilderness. It is up to us to carry on this legacy and do the same. What can you do? Contact the Idaho Conservation League. Request meetings with your local and congressional representatives. Organize a petition, seek an audience with Midas Gold.

Here’s another example.

While violence perpetrated by extreme rightwing groups is tragically on the rise, I don’t believe the right answer is to fight violence with violence – like antifa activists are doing. But I firmly believe that positive action can send a strong message back to communities of hate and bigotry.

To that end, you could volunteer your time at a refugee resettlement organization, like the International Rescue Committee or the local non-profit “Welcome Housing,” which provides affordable housing options for newly arrived refugees. Or you could attend next week’s teach-in hosted by the Marilyn Shuler Human Rights Initiative, which is taking place September 28 at the university library.

There are many great organizations close to home that need your time, energy, ideas and resources.

³⁶ Idaho Conservation League, “Mining,” 2017. <https://www.idahoconservation.org/issues/mining/>

Third, in the spirit of never letting a good (political) crisis go to waste, use this tumultuous moment to push for bigger, bolder change.

Earlier this month, two Harvard Business professors released a report about reforming our political system. They characterized U.S. politics as dominated by a “duopoly.” They observe that our system has entrenched two political parties, insulated them from pressure to serve constituents better, and protected them from new competition.

They suggest a number of reforms, some of which are very doable.

One idea they propose is the “Govern for California” approach. This model leverages private philanthropy to support candidates based on strict governance and performance criteria, regardless of party membership or ideology. Breaking the two-party lock on power and changing incentives so that candidates are rewarded for adopting centrist positions is an idea worth exploring.³⁷

In fact, consider the following: why not establish an ad hoc western political coalition comprised of democrats and republicans?

Such a coalition could include progressive ideas from leaders like Church and Andrus, as well as conservative principles from contemporaries like John McCain and Jeff Flake.

The idea behind this coalition would be to come up with common sense, practical, and sensible policies in order to solve difficult problems, break political gridlock, and get things done.

The coalitions Frank Church built to protect public lands and pass landmark environmental legislation are instructive. As he relates:

Back in the early 70's...an ad hoc committee of conservationists and lumber industry representatives was convened by the American Forestry Association. Its purpose was to identify ‘areas of agreement’. The concept is a good one because it puts diverse groups to work, side by side, searching for consensus on matters they do agree upon. And in addition, by helping build a common effort to get more from our forests it helps reduce the polarization that so often bogs us down...³⁸

Drawing from my own experience in the senate, I can attest that my colleagues – on both sides - genuinely wanted to enact good laws to benefit the country. I worked on countless bills with republican colleagues from Senator Lugar and Senator Corker’s offices. I believe the spirit of bipartisanship still exists, although it is harder to find. If we make an explicit effort to resuscitate this legacy, build coalitions to solve common problems, and create “political inevitability” on the right issues, this can lead to a lot of good.

³⁷ Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter.

³⁸ Frank Church, “Wilderness in a Balanced Land Use Framework.” Lecture, Moscow, ID, March 23, 1977.

America is a resilient country. In the darkest moments of the 60s and 70s, Church and his cohorts feared we were on the brink of nuclear catastrophe. The specter of the Soviet Union gleamed sharply. Riots tore through the streets of our cities. It felt like the country was engaged in a never-ending battle with itself. Somehow, we put the pieces back together and forged ahead.

Though I am clearly concerned by the myriad challenges of our time, I am also confident that we will get through this latest period of turbulence.

I want to end with a final thought.

I mentioned in the beginning that we have a 15-month old baby. Being a parent makes me view the future both with hope and worry. I am distressed about the scope of the challenges that I've laid out before you. I harbor many doubts about whether we are willing to make the hard choices necessary to confront our deepest divisions and tackle our gravest environmental concerns.

But for my son's sake, I steadfastly continue to have faith and optimism in our country.

We cannot wall ourselves from the world and leave problems for someone else to solve. We cannot afford to retreat into a bubble, either as Idahoans or Americans, just because our relative privilege allows us to. We have a moral obligation to confront our deepest divisions and our gravest issues – both at home and abroad.

Church said: "How urgent it is for us to demonstrate to all the watching world that Democracy has the will to serve vital public needs."³⁹

Let that be a reminder to all of us of our obligations and duties as citizens of this great nation.

³⁹ Frank Church, "Keynote Address." Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles, CA, July 11, 1960. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKCAMP1960-1034-002.aspx>