

A CALL TO ACTION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE SPIRIT OF LIBERTY: AT HOME, IN THE WORLD

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FOR
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The George W. Bush Institute is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization that develops leaders, advances policy, and takes action to solve today's most pressing challenges. Working with others, we catalyze innovative initiatives that advance peace, prosperity, and freedom at home and abroad.

This Call to Action is part of a major new effort of the Bush Institute's Human Freedom Initiative. It seeks in a bipartisan way to affirm our 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 is to identify several areas for action by government and the private sector, by institutions and individuals, to celebrate, protect, and extend the spirit of ordered liberty at home, and in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

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. This is an extraordinary historical achievement, and American leadership has been central to its success. So, too, has the unique promise of America and its commitment to a particular vision of the human good.

Yet today that order appears to be under attack and at real risk of dissolving. The crisis is not new or sudden. Yet there is a certain urgency newly in the air. 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. Others have taken steps toward democracy but reversed course under their current leaders. Non-state actors, especially violent extremists in the Islamic State, also attack the established order.

Perhaps even more troubling is the increasingly evident downdraft in democratic resilience in countries that have long been part of the consolidated democratic West. 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. Europe, in particular, is in deep crisis.

The United States is not immune from the rise of illiberalism. 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. There is no question that global economic disruption is altering the landscape of work in ways that many Americans find difficult to navigate. Nor, it seems, are our institutions up to the challenge. The media today is widely mistrusted. The American political system is broken and polarized. Political discourse is in a damaged and degraded state. Many Americans feel it is time for the United States to turn inward.

A CALL TO ACTION

The issues at hand and the problems the United States faces are complicated and not easily solved. Yet with effort they can be overcome. There are at least four particular areas where our society and government can take action to strengthen democracy and revive the faith of Americans in it: the vulnerability of our democracy to 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. All four areas demand our attention.

I. 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. The newest and arguably the most insidious danger is the effort of foreign governments like Russia to influence American political discourse and undermine the credibility of our democratic election process. This is an extraordinary development, and for America an unprecedented one. 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.”

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.

Enlist social media in the fight.

Information distributors like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Reddit can promote greater transparency, help impede the spread of questionable and false stories, and incentivize users who push back against disinformation and propaganda.

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 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.

Help Americans become better consumers of news and information.

Americans need to be better equipped to interpret what they encounter in the media, from new social-media platforms to traditional broadcast and print media.

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.

II. PROJECT AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

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. This isn't incidental or accidental. For more than seven decades the United States has consistently, if imperfectly, led the world toward these achievements.

The United States remains the indispensable nation. Yet many Americans have grown weary of the burdens of global leadership and unsure about its benefits. 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. 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

Make a concerted and compelling case for the benefits of global trade.

Business and labor need to come together to explain how Americans benefit from international commerce and free trade agreements—and, just as important, what needs to be done to ensure that these agreements advance more widely shared prosperity.

Update North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Twenty-five years after NAFTA was negotiated, there is broad recognition that it should be updated. Yet renegotiation cannot become an excuse for American withdrawal or capricious limits on market competition.

Revive ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Business and labor leaders need to revisit this agreement and find a way to assure Americans that this is in fact a good deal.

Finalize negotiation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

This trade agreement would encompass almost 50 percent of the world's economy and include America's longest-standing European trade partners and allies.

INTEGRATING VALUES AND INTERESTS

Help the public see how democratic allies help make America safer.

Military and political leaders should look for opportunities to help the American public better appreciate the contributions of our alliances to the battles against ISIS and other threats to American security.

Adequately finance America's diplomacy and development assistance.

The instruments of American soft power are essential to securing U.S. interests around the world. Recognition of, and investments in, their strategic role must remain constant.

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.

Appoint ambassadors who are articulate defenders of American values.

Calling on our ambassadors 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.

Enabling the world to see us as we are, an eclectic, dynamic society striving to live up to our ideals, is the best messaging. This requires being more strategic and reviving a U.S. agency for public diplomacy that can fight the 21st-century war of ideas.

III. STRENGTHEN THE AMERICAN CITIZEN

America's 13 original states "joined in one solid compact" represented by the words *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). Political polarization 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. Two areas for focus and renewal are civic learning and civic service.

CIVIC LEARNING

Encourage state and local policymakers to put a renewed focus on civics.

There is opportunity to improve outcomes by increasing instructional time, ensuring high standards and assessments, and investing in professional development and training for teachers.

Focus federal resources.

The federal government should be encouraged to focus its resources across agencies by incentivizing high quality models of civic learning that can be replicated at state and district levels.

Promote innovation and technology.

Both the public and private sectors can help improve the quality of civics education by promoting learning tools and techniques that bring the study of our democracy to life.

Assess civics attainment more frequently.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics should be reinstated for grades 4 and 12 (currently only given for grade 8).

Encourage bipartisan efforts to prioritize civic education.

Nonpartisan initiatives to spotlight the country's civic education crisis and consider solutions should be encouraged.

SERVICE TO COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

Foster a spirit of service in schools.

Effective methods of fostering active and engaged citizenship should be promoted, including participation in student government, discussion of politics and other controversial issues, and “purpose-driven” service.

Champion voluntary service.

Volunteer service is one of the great responsibilities of citizenship. Both public and private sectors can help take to scale good ideas that engage more Americans.

IV. 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. The ongoing distrust can be corrosive. Three institutions—the media, religious institutions, and higher education—are discussed here as examples for how to think about the problem and begin rebuilding confidence.

THE MEDIA

Clearly differentiate commentary from news.

News organizations need to take more purposeful steps to differentiate between commentary and impartial news coverage.

Increase transparency in reporting.

The media needs to recommit itself to greater transparency, which includes posting supporting documents and materials and reducing reliance on anonymous sources.

Continue to show greater diversity.

There is still room for improvement in achieving greater geographic, class, ideological, and cultural diversity within news organizations in order to 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.

Admit and correct mistakes.

When mistakes happen, media institutions should report thoroughly and openly on their own errors. Strengthening and revitalizing the Society for Professional Journalists should also be a priority.

ORGANIZED RELIGION

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.

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.

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.

Exercise greater financial accountability.

Meeting standards for financial accountability, transparency, fundraising, and board governance is vital for maintaining and restoring trust in religious institutions.

Don't subordinate religious faith to partisan loyalty.

Representatives of religious institutions need to be much more careful about allowing themselves to be viewed as political operatives.

HIGHER EDUCATION**Adopt the Chicago Principles of Freedom of Expression.**

The University of Chicago's efforts to protect freedom of expression and open discussion of ideas 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.

The AAUP champions academic freedom and intellectual debate on college campuses. Its 2014 report on trigger warnings rejects the "presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom."

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.

Help parents and students fairly judge the intellectual climate on campuses.

Parents and students need more practical tools like the Heterodox Academy Guide to Colleges to find academic environments where different political viewpoints are welcomed.

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.

CONCLUSION

On the face of it, this Call to Action proposes an enormously diverse and varied collection of recommendations. But in fact, its proposals are all of a piece. They aim to rouse the American people to the global defense of our common way of life—to the defense of the free society and the vision of the good that underlies it. America cannot afford to lose its confidence and hope. The better future of the world depends on this.

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.

We must recover responsibility in every arena of the life of our country. 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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