

Quotations for Difficult Political Times

What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias ...

Learned Hand (judge)¹

Never let yourself be diverted, either by what you wish to believe, or by what you think could have beneficial social effects if it were believed.

Bertrand Russell (philosopher)²

Gentlemen, I take it we are all in agreement on the decision here. Then, I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until the next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.

Alfred Sloan (business leader)³

[Our Constitution] wasn't a perfect document. It allowed for the inhumanity of slavery and failed to guarantee women — and even men who didn't own property — the right to participate in the political process. But embedded in this document was a North Star that would guide future generations; a system of representative government — a democracy — through which we could better realize our highest ideals.

Barack Obama (president)⁴

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves."

James Madison (president)⁵

Be curious, not judgmental

Ted Lasso (fictional character)⁶

¹ [Speech](#), Constitution Day, 1944.

² This quote comes from a recorded interview with Russell on the BBC television program *Face to Face* in 1959. It can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/ihaB8AF0hZo>.

³ Quoted in Alfred Sloan, Guru, *The Economist* (January 30, 2009).

⁴ [Speech](#), Democratic National Convention, 2020.

⁵ Federalist No. 10.

⁶ In Season 1, Episode 8 the television show *Ted Lasso*, the title character credits this sentiment to Walt Whitman, though there is no evidence Whitman ever expressed it.

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The surest way to work up a crusade in favor of some good cause is to promise people they will have a chance of maltreating someone. To be able to destroy with good conscience, to be able to behave badly and call your bad behavior 'righteous indignation' — this is the height of psychological luxury, the most delicious of moral treats.

Aldous Huxley (novelist)⁷

We must be clear in our own minds that we need other people to discover and correct our mistakes (as they need us); especially those people who have grown up with different ideas in a different environment. This too leads to toleration.”

Karl Popper (philosopher)⁸

For many of us, games become inchoate contests between differing values that we imagine represented by the competing teams. The games satisfy or disappoint our sense of virtue as members of the “right” group. In that sense, the games are not just games -- they’re morality plays.

Will Blythe (writer)⁹

“We suffer more in imagination than in reality.”

Seneca (Stoic philosopher)¹⁰

Politics is the organization of hatreds.

Henry Adams (political historian)¹¹

The Constitution isn’t a pro-slavery document; it is a glorious liberty document. Fellow-citizens! ... In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; ... Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? . . .

Frederick Douglass (publisher, orator)¹²

⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Introduction* to The Easton Press edition of Samuel Butler *Erewhon* (1934)

⁸ Karl Popper, *The World of Parmenides: Essays on the Presocratic Enlightenment* (1990).

⁹ This quote comes from a 2009 interview with Blythe about his book, *To Hate Like This is to Be Happy Forever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke-North Carolina Basketball Rivalry* (2007). The interview can be found at a site called “Faith & Leadership,” and can be found here: <https://faithandleadership.com/will-blythe-the-dukenorth-carolina-basketball-rivalry>.

¹⁰ Seneca, Thirteenth Letter (On groundless fears).

¹¹ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1917)

¹² [Speech](#), What To a Slave is the Fourth of July, 1852.

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[A] society or an economy can be Pareto-optimal and still be perfectly disgusting.

Amartya Sen (economist, Nobel Laureate)¹³

[T]he relationship between money and political outcomes is far from simple, largely because where large amounts of money come into play on one side, others often mobilize as well. ... [S]cholars have found no smoking gun, no systematic relationship between campaign contributions and policy success, a fact that might be surprising to readers of the press, where it seems that campaign contributions are equated with lobbying power across the board.

Political Science Text¹⁴

A good man does not spy around for the black spots in others, but presses unswervingly on towards the mark.

Marcus Aurelius (Stoic philosopher)¹⁵

[L]et's be clear ... that a philosophy of right wing politics ... exists that is not merely paid hate literature. ... Many ... assume that conservative ideas are not much more than a series of sham apologies in which well-paid scribes write whatever their well-paid bosses at Fox News and Koch Industries want them to write.

Adam Gopnik (writer)¹⁶

I've never been a liberal in any way, shape or form. There's no one that's ever thought I was. ... I don't fault any of them who believe that they're much more progressive and much more liberal. God bless them, and all they need to do ... for them to get theirs — elect more liberals.

Joe Manchin (U.S. senator)¹⁷

Anyone with the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit atrocities."

Voltaire (philosopher)¹⁸

¹³ Amartya Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* 22 (1970).

¹⁴ Frank Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball and Beth L. Leech, *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why?* (2009).

¹⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 4, Passage 18.

¹⁶ Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (2019), p. 84.

¹⁷ [Remarks](#) to reporters, 2021.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Collection des lettres sur les Miracles* (Olivier Ferret & José-Michel Moureaux eds., 60D, 2018). For the etymology of this quotation and its various translations from the French see Quote Investigator (web site) at <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2021/11/08/absurdities/>.

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Conversations...begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another.

Kwame Appiah (philosopher)¹⁹

When our media was common, there was more common cause. Right now the architecture of our political space has voices telling you what you want because they're also a filter of what you know. ... [It] suggests that there is some war of values that is often belied the minute you talk to people.

Stacey Abrams (politician)²⁰

Raise your hand if you've ever posted anything online to 'own the libs.' I know that it's fun and that it can feel good, but ... are you persuading anyone? Who are you persuading? We've all been guilty of it at some point or another, but this kind of speech isn't leadership — it's the exact opposite.

Nikki Haley (politician)²¹

Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity towards those who are not regarded as members of the herd. ... Fear generates impulses of cruelty, and therefore promotes such superstitious beliefs as seem to justify cruelty. Neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear.

Bertrand Russell (philosopher)²²

I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article ... and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

Nicholas Carr (writer)²³

¹⁹ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2007)

²⁰ [Interview](#), 2019.

²¹ This quote comes from a 2018 speaking engagement by then UN representative (and former Governor and GOP presidential hopeful) Nikki Haley. Aaron Blake, *Nikki Haley Warns Against 'Owning the Libs'. That's Basically Trump's Entire Political Strategy*, *Wash. Post* (July 24, 2018).

²² Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish* (1943), published in Russell: *Unpopular Essays* (2009).

²³ Nicholas Carr, *Is Google Making Us Stupid*, *The Atlantic* (July/August 2008).

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Everything happens fast, but nothing actually happens. Each story on televised news is 'breaking' until it is displaced by the next one. So we are hit by wave upon wave but never see the ocean. ... Watching televised news is sometimes little more than looking at someone who is also looking at a picture. We take this collective trance to be normal. We have slowly fallen into it.

Timothy Snyder (historian)²⁴

You can tell me that 70 percent of Americans don't participate in the culture war, but it doesn't really matter. Events today are driven by small numbers that can shame and intimidate large numbers. Social media has changed the dynamic. Even if most Americans practice excellent fire safety habits, if a small minority is rewarded for throwing lit matches, we're going to live in an age of arson.

Jonathan Haidt (psychologist)²⁵

²⁴ Snyder, *On Tyranny*, p. 61.

²⁵ Haidt is quoted in Sabrina Tavernise & Nate Cohn, The America That Isn't Polarized, *N.Y. Times* (September 20, 2019).