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## OPINION

# To unite the country, we need honesty and courage

All of us must speak the truth — including painful truths that unsettle not only our foes but also our friends and, most especially, ourselves.

By **Robert P. George and Cornel West** Updated July 15, 2020, 2:34 p.m.



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Fellow Citizens:

Honesty and courage alone can save our wounded, disunited country now.

We need the honesty and courage to speak the truth — including painful truths that unsettle not only our foes but also our friends and, most especially, ourselves.

We need the honesty and courage to honor the contributions of the great men and women who have come before us — those who articulated and defended true principles of justice and the common good, built or helped to preserve worthy institutions, and modeled important virtues.

We need the honesty and courage to recognize the faults, flaws, and failings of even the greatest of our heroes — and to acknowledge our own faults, flaws, and failings.

We need the honesty and courage to recognize progress toward the ideal of equal justice and movement toward the common good that our civilization and nation have made — and the blows against injustice, oppression, and tyranny we as a people have struck, sometimes at incalculable costs of blood and treasure.

We need the honesty and courage to recognize the blights on our history, the grave wrongs that have been done, reflecting the failure of our leaders and institutions — and our own failures — to honor our principles of liberty and justice for all.

We need the honesty and courage to express dissent — to say, “No, I will *not* go along” — when conscience tells us that our own ideological or political tribe has gone astray or gone too far or become fanatical and blind to integrity and the dignity of all.

We need the honesty and courage to stand up — to stand alone, if necessary — to speak the truth, as God gives us to see the truth, to the politically, economically, and culturally powerful as well as to the relatively powerless.

We need the honesty and courage to think first of the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, and the impact on them, for good or for ill, of our own actions; the actions of institutions — be they economic, social, educational, or philanthropic — in which we play a role; and the

actions of government at all levels. This will not generate unanimity as to what policies are best. Reasonable people of good will will often disagree. But this can — and we believe must — be a starting point on which there is common ground.

We need the honesty and courage not to compromise our beliefs or go silent on them out of a desire to be accepted, or out of fear of being ostracized, excluded, or canceled.

We need the honesty and courage to consider with an open mind and heart points of view that challenge our beliefs — even our deepest, most cherished identity-forming beliefs. We need the intellectual humility to recognize our own fallibility — and that, too, requires honesty and courage.

We need the honesty and courage to recognize and acknowledge that there are reasonable people of good will who do not share even some of our deepest, most cherished beliefs. This is true for Christians, like ourselves, or members of other traditions of faith, as well as for religious skeptics and atheists. It is true for conservatives as well as progressives, for libertarians as well as socialists.

We need the honesty and courage to treat decent and honest people with whom we disagree — even on the most consequential questions — as partners in truth-seeking and fellow citizens of our republican order, not as enemies to be destroyed. And we must always respect and protect their human rights and civil liberties.

We need the honesty and courage to be willing to change our beliefs and stances if evidence, reason, and compelling argument persuade us that they are in need of revision — even at the cost of alienating us from communities in which we are comfortable and rely on for personal affirmation, solidarity, and support.

We need the honesty and courage to love, in the highest and best sense: to will the good of the other for the sake of the other, to treat even our adversaries as precious members of the human family. We need the honesty and courage to resist the hatred — the spirit of hatred — that the zeal even for good causes can induce in we frail, fallen, fallible human

beings, and that corrupts the human soul and leads inexorably to spiritual emptiness and to tyranny, even among those who began as sincere advocates of freedom and justice.

To President Trump and former vice president Joe Biden: We hope you will consider our plea, though we, from our different vantage points, have been critical of both of you. You must hold yourselves to higher standards. We plead with you to exemplify the honesty and courage that all of us must embody if we are to reunite this nation and rebuild the civic friendship — what Abraham Lincoln called the “bonds of affection” — without which no republican democracy “can long endure.” Where you have failed or fallen short, as we all fail and fall short, strive with God’s help to do better. Remember that victories can be pyrrhic, destroying the very thing for which the combatants struggle. When that thing is our precious American experiment in ordered liberty and republican democracy, its destruction would be a tragedy beyond all human powers of reckoning.

Honesty and courage could finally give this nation, under God, the blessing for which Harriet Tubman struggled and sacrificed and Abraham Lincoln prayed and acted: a new birth of freedom. To our leaders and to all our fellow citizens, we say with all our hearts, as two dear brothers and friends: Let us rededicate ourselves to these virtues, and let us not fail in fidelity to them.

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