

David White Response

In a piece that appeared in Baltimore's *The Evening Sun* on September 18, 1926, H. L. Mencken wrote, "No one in this world, so far as I know—and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me—has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby. The mistake that is made always runs the other way. Because the plain people are able to speak and understand, and even, in many cases, to read and write, it is assumed that they have ideas in their heads, and an appetite for more. This assumption is a folly."

If we agree with Mr. Mencken, then there is nothing new in this article by Mr. Haidt. Those who would seek power for power itself would be well advised to apply this wisdom. If Mr. Haidt is correct, then, this is exactly what has been happening.

The trouble is, in my opinion, is that all sides of the various areas of conflict believe that everyone's viewpoint, *except their own*, is based in stupidity. *We* believe that our opinions are based in fact-based reality and that *their* opinions are based in something else.

And, thus, our problem.

It appears to me that all sides of the political debates seek two things, sometimes simultaneously. Firstly, they seek to be recognized as being correct. They want their viewpoint to win out among the polity at large. Secondly, they seek to be recognized as a victim in that the other side disagrees.

Donald Trump has achieved the status of an idol amongst his political supporters. Thus, no amount of disparagement, regardless of its basis in reality, will sway his followers. But, knowing that an idol can quickly fall and be made either a pariah or a martyr, those who use Mr. Trump's status for their own quest for power have moved quickly to rig things to the latter. They have even used two epithets (and trained Mr. Trump to use them), "RINO" and "Never-Trumper," the latter which they adopted from the opposition, to undermine reality as it presents itself so that his inevitable downfall may be attributed to those wanting to undermine his supporters.

But are Donald Trump's supporters unique in this? Martin Luther King's moral failures were legion. John Kennedy. LBJ. Bill Clinton. The most moral of the liberal presidents has, arguably, been Jimmy Carter. But how effective was he as a politician? Did Barack Obama move the country in a moral direction effectively, or did he simply militarize the opposition? Joe Biden has been in public office since 1970, in national public office since 1972. Has his tenure been moral? What compromises of conscience have been essential in his political career?

Others will make the point that the problem lies in the medium of expression, that social media and the internet generally create new challenges due to their reach and speed. I don't think this reasoning is wrong, I just don't think it's relevant. Political activists on all sides will continue to ply the communication technology available to them in the way they find to be most effective, regardless of what that technology is. Certainly we can temper the speed or the content of social media, but will this, in any way, dilute its power?

There is a line in Billie Holiday's hit "God Bless the Child," "Them that's got shall get, them that's not shall lose. So the Bible said and it still is news." If *our* ideas are to be heard and seen in the public square, we need to play the game as it is, not as we wish it to be.

-David White-