

The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy
December 2020

As America wrestled with the unfolding and growing turmoil of the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy, speaking at Vanderbilt University in 1963, observed “In a time of tension it is more important than ever to unite this country ... so that all of our people will be one.” Important words then—and now.

Today, the nation faces another fraught moment. As the 21st century’s third decade commences, American democracy is struggling amid deep polarization, a pandemic here and abroad, questions about economic and social justice, and declining faith in its institutions. Total partisan warfare has replaced evidence-based problem-solving as the controlling force in our public life; the engines of perpetual conflict are overwhelming the classic work of politics: the mediation of differences. Rhetorical jousting matches, whether in 280-character tweets or split screen soundbites, elicit emotional outrage, reinforce ideological intransigence, and elevate platitudes of polarization above informed discourse. The path forward is therefore all-too-often left uncharted—and, perhaps most tragically, even unsought. This is not a partisan point: As a matter of discernible fact, the American experiment as a diverse, multiethnic democratic republic is undergoing one of its most difficult tests in its 244-year-old history.

There is, as the Hebrew Bible tells us, nothing new under the sun. From Jamestown to Philadelphia, from Fort Sumter to Appomattox, from the New Deal to McCarthyism, from the Warren Court to the resistance to civil rights, America has been perennially shaped by argument and by divisions. Disagreement, after all, is the oxygen of democracy. The crisis of our present time, however, is marked by a difference not just of degree but of kind. Not since the Civil War have so many Americans held such radically different views not just of politics but of reality itself.

And yet to know what has come before is to be armed against despair. If the men and women of preceding generations, with all their flaws and limitations and ambitions and appetites, could press on through ignorance and superstition, racism and sexism, selfishness and greed, then perhaps we, too, can take another step toward that most elusive of destinations: a more perfect union.

The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy aims to advance toward that more perfect union at a time when the urgency of the political moment calls for action. Established with the core premise that the country has become disconnected from evidence and reason, the Project seeks to supplant ideology with fact. It will re-introduce evidence, broadly defined, into the national conversation, pointing to solutions beyond reflexive ideological claims that will mix responses from the “left,” “right,” and “center.” Whether in statistical or narrative form, evidence shines a brighter light on how to solve problems than ideology. As shown over our country’s history, no one ideology whether liberal or conservative, populist or nationalist, progressive or puritan has all the answers.

With its geographic location, enduring commitment to tackling society’s grand challenges, and the formidable intellectual talent already on campus, Vanderbilt is ideally suited to advance this critical national conversation forward.

“To strengthen the ties”

Vanderbilt University was founded on the promise of unity. As Cornelius Vanderbilt noted in 1876, “If Vanderbilt University shall, through its influence, contribute to strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country, I shall feel that it has accomplished one of the objects that led me to take an interest in it.”

Though these words echo the hope of a post-Civil War society searching for a rebirth, both Vanderbilt and Nashville have a rich tradition of bringing together a nation in tumult. It was in the university’s hometown where many locate the beginnings of the national civil rights movement. Vanderbilt students and faculty joined contemporaries and colleagues from American Baptist College, Fisk University, Tennessee State University, and Meharry Medical College. Together, these men and women generated a synergy unmatched in any other city. Ultimately, they formed the “Nashville strategy,” demonstrating through various sit-ins the effectiveness of nonviolent action—a tactic that was then replicated throughout the country to underscore the absurd cruelty of injustice.

Our location has other advantages. We are in the heart of a blue city within a red state, a position that compels our leaders to find solutions that cross the ideological divide. Both Nashville and Tennessee also have a longstanding tradition of producing unifying leaders like Vanderbilt alumni Lamar Alexander, who served for decades as Tennessee’s governor and U.S. senator. Of course, our physical location near the center of our country—removed from the coasts—has more than just symbolic importance: it allows us to easily convene conversations to reset the nation’s path toward unity.

This context meshes well with Vanderbilt’s collaborative spirit illustrated by on-campus partnerships tackling vital current problems, including the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the Fisk-Vanderbilt Bridge Program, the Vanderbilt Meharry Alliance, and the John Seigenthaler Center. Likewise, our annual Chancellor’s Lecture Series demonstrates the university’s commitment to nurturing democracy and modeling civility by bringing leading figures of divergent views to campus. Past guests include President George W. Bush; President-Elect Joe Biden; Former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and General Colin Powell; and Former National Security Advisors to Donald Trump, John Bolton, and to Barack Obama, Susan Rice.

The Project builds upon Vanderbilt’s world-class faculty who have long showed a deep and abiding interest in tackling big problems through an empirical lens. Those scholarly efforts include the workings of democratic institutions, income inequality, racial justice, education policy, public opinion, and social media. Through its website and other communication channels, the Project will share the many insights of our faculty and show their relevance to key questions facing the country at this critical moment in time.

Along with a committed interdisciplinary pool of talented scholars who understand the urgency of the moment, the geographical, cultural, and structural strengths of Vanderbilt makes the University uniquely situated to advance a national conversation that focuses on evidence-based problem-solving.

Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy

Our new Project on Unity and American Democracy will leverage Vanderbilt’s intellectual capital and commitment to solving society’s big problems to explore publicly paths to unite the American

people, examining vital questions of our democracy's efficacy, durability, and capacity. This effort will yield a non-partisan hub for leading scholars, key policymakers, activists, opinion leaders, and others to develop evidence-based solutions that are not driven by ideological predispositions.

The Project aims to inform thinking and reframe public discourse through the following initial themes. We say *initial* intentionally because, as an evidence-based undertaking, we expect what we learn will inevitably lead us to revise these starting points:

- Polarization: Its Past, Present, and Future
- Hours of Hope: Case Studies in American Progress
- Race in America: Toward a Nation of Equality
- Under God: The Role of Religion in a Divided Time
- To Keep the Republic: Strengthening Democratic Principles at Home and Abroad
- Information Marketplace: Ensuring the Public has the Data
- Cultural Bridges: Using Artistic Expression to Narrow the Divide

Under this framework, the Project will generate deliverables such as historical case studies, original empirically driven scholarship, television and podcast opportunities, new courses for both current students and alumni, and conversations with prominent and thoughtful figures from across the political spectrum. For example, the Project's launch will coincide with the 2021 inauguration and include essays from influential scholars, amplified by a series of virtual events with leading national figures from both political parties. Post-launch, these efforts will be bolstered through partnerships with key campus collaborators like Vanderbilt's Data Science Institute and the Wond'ry, our innovation center where students bring their ideas to life.

Former Governor of Tennessee Bill Haslam will jointly chair the Project along with faculty members Samar Ali—a leading voice at the intersection of civil rights, national security, and economic development—and Jon Meacham, an acclaimed scholar on leadership and the American presidency. The co-chairs will provide strategic advice to advance the conversation about unity and American democracy. Gray Sasser, a Vanderbilt Law School graduate and former partner at Frost Brown Todd LLC in Nashville, will direct the Project's daily operations. He previously served as senior vice president for congressional affairs of the Export-Import Bank of the United States.

Our vision

Our country is at an inflection point—one that challenges the premise of the American experiment. Just as Vanderbilt served as a source of unity after the Civil War and Nashville as an incubator for the civil rights movement, our community is poised once again through our geography, our commitment to problem-solving, and our talent to “strengthen the ties” and, therefore, answer an urgent need to heal our divisions.

By adhering to the historical and empirical record, The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy will reinvigorate our national discourse, the public, and our leaders in the possibilities and promises of democracy. Through this crucial work, the Project will shine light on what binds Americans together allowing it to illuminate the path toward that more perfect union.