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Preparing a New Generation to Counter a Rising Tide of Violence

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By Matthew Daniels, JD, PhD

The specter of violence increasingly casts a dark cloud over American politics and civic life. Many participants in the political process are normalizing the use of violence in ways that will help to make such violent acts more common over time.

For instance, Jay Jones, a member of Virginia's House of Delegates, was elected state attorney general in early November despite texts that revealed his fantasies about executing the Republican speaker with "two bullets in the head." Jones also expressed his wish that the lawmaker's children would "die in their mother's arms."

From the Republican side came revelations of the Telegram chat involving leaders of various Young Republican groups. The banter went well beyond political hyperbole. There were racial, ethnic, anti-Semitic, and sexual slurs, casual references to torturing, burning, and gassing political opponents, and light-hearted references to rape, Nazis, and Adolf Hitler.

There should be no place in America for the politics of hatred and violence, which affects all of us. While Attorney General Jones and trash-talking Young Republicans are not to blame for these terrible acts, they have helped to contribute to the corrosion of politics across the country.

At this dire moment we all should stare into the abyss and take a big step back. We all have a huge stake in preventing violence from becoming the new political norm.

Abstract pleas for civility are insufficient. We have raced past the point where American politics can be fixed with an adjustment or two in participants' language and demeanor. At stake is how we see each other and our joint participation in the public square.

There is a path forward that offers hope for rescuing American politics from its increasing descent into discord and even violence. Moreover, it is based on what Americans once knew so well: the importance of respecting life and liberty based on universal or inalienable rights.

Americans should reflect on other moments when our society was tearing itself apart, with death replacing dialogue. Six decades ago, Americans were bitterly divided over the increasingly pressing demand for equality for all. On April 4, 1968, the greatest leader of that struggle, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was struck down by an assassin's bullet. Although it cost him his life, the principles he left behind helped bring us back together. Today they continue to offer a template for the future, a practical vaccine against hatred and violence.

King relied on transcendent values embodied in our nation's founding, seeking to unify rather than to divide our society. Essential to his approach is the belief that we all are made in the image of God, individually equal and valuable. King called on us to find our better angels, respect the lives and dignity even of our opponents, and practice nonviolence. In doing so, he became a global inspiration, revered around the world.

The challenge today is to reignite our shared passion for a good and just society and pass our understanding on to rising generations. It is essential to instill in them a commitment to fundamental principles based on the eternal truths which provide a foundation for this nation.

Toward that end, in partnership with Ambassador Andrew Young, we have developed a comprehensive educational program to teach the unifying, universal values championed by Dr. King. This includes K12 curricula as well as educational programs for the faith and corporate communities.

However, even that isn't enough. The next generation ultimately must lead this effort to strengthen the social foundation of our democracy. To that end, we have also launched the Ambassador Young Fellows Program. The purpose of this initiative is to inspire a new generation of Dr. Kings to defend human rights, reject violence, defeat prejudice, and build a just society.

The program will be designed to recruit and train, as well as encourage and connect dedicated young leaders — from every community in our nation — who are determined to leave a better world behind them. Ultimately, we hope to take this program international as well. The many terrible conflicts around the world demonstrate the desperate need for a new way of thinking about ourselves and the larger world in which we live.

In such dangerous times, we should all see ourselves as victims of the violence that is engulfing American politics and civic life. Although a specific act of violence may be directed at someone else, our whole nation is the ultimate target. So now is the time to train a new generation to lead us into a better future.

Matthew Daniels, JD, PhD, is a Distinguished University Professor of Law, Political Science and Human Rights at Anderson University. He is also the founder of Good of All, an international human rights education organization.