

C. S. Lewis and American political rhetoric

By [Andrew Lazo](#)

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As this campaign season reels recklessly, leaving a wake of increasing intolerance, those holding differing opinions can find little common ground. Past seasons of “come, let us reason together” have disappeared; unreasoned assertions from the chronically ignorant now dominate the increasingly purchased airwaves. Little from any side appears balanced or fair. We craft dollar-driven hegemonies of self-satisfied ignorance, cultures of the titillated and thoughtless. Where we once enshrined the ideals of freedom, we now erect a golden calf of contempt atop a tower of babble. Call it the gospel according to the uninformed.

When creed gives way to screed, who speaks into our opinionated age with a staid voice of wisdom? A *Washington Post* op-ed by Laura Turner recently pointed in a profoundly helpful direction. While it’s doubtful that [C. S. Lewis actually predicted Donald Trump](#), the famed author’s prophetic voice echoes in this political season.

Turner’s article shows Lewis decrying the dangers of patriotism becoming a demon when it becomes a god. But Lewis has even more pointed wisdom to offer. His devil Screwtape urges the making of “an extreme patriot or an extreme pacifist,” exhorting us that “[a]ll extremes except extreme devotion to [God], are to be encouraged.” We turn blind eyes to this crisis of the extreme to our own peril.

From a life devoted to literature spanning centuries, Lewis offers an alternative to the trap of extremity. “The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison,” Lewis says. “My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.” He claims that generous exposure to other voices “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality.”

Inspired by her [long study of Lewis’s circle of friends](#), Diana Pavlac Glyer calls for such selfless exploration in her talk [“Intellectual Hospitality.”](#) Drawing from the Inklings’ practices, Glyer argues that “the impulse to gather, and the impulse to

maintain a healthy space” suggest a discourse of distinction wherein we speak with grace even while maintaining very deliberate differences. We must hear voices other than our own.

G.K. Chesterton (who influenced Lewis enormously) speaks pithily into today’s dilemma: “People generally quarrel because they cannot argue” he claims. We have all but lost the art of generous dialectic.

How might we regain this vital path to *oppose* but not *despise*? In both work and life, Lewis modeled a solution: *love*. Lewis’s description of love as the way “we escape from our self into one other” offers perspective we vitally need in this angry hour.

Perhaps the most efficient way to see with other eyes, to practice intellectual hospitality, springs from cherishing others as uniquely created in the image of God however different from us. [Justices Scalia and Ginsberg’s surprising friendship](#) demonstrated such charity. In listening respectfully to other experiences and opinions, “I become a thousand men and yet remain myself,” Lewis asserts. In doing so, “I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

We deeply need such transcendence to speak to us from other eras. Distant voices supply profound insights to those eager to take long views of current crises. Lewis’s potent wisdom can join voices from American history in helping us navigate a political process that generates excessive sound and fury.

We have perhaps never had a greater need for Abraham Lincoln’s sober charge in his Second Inaugural Address: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds.”

Could Lewis’s timeless admonition to heed voices from the past and see through others’ eyes offer us answers? As the cash-infused rhetoric of elections swirls around us, can we escape the tyranny of bluster? Might we express opinions wisely informed and deeply held while loving our neighbors as ourselves?

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