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Overcoming American Tribalism: Healing America through Common Purpose

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Healing America through Common Purpose
A CWRU North Star Seminar and Conversation on Justice
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BEN VINSON: At Case Western Reserve University, we are driven by a vision that we call our North Star. It states that Case Western Reserve University is a high impact research community. Where humanity, science, and technology meet to create a just and thriving world. And to help us further achieve that mission, we highlight diverse people, diverse opinions, and diverse ideas, but always with the goal of engaging in a dialogue that is civil and respectful. The series that you're engaging in today, the North Star seminar series, is trying to do just that. We need conversations like one that we're having today. We need to keep civil discourse and learning alive at our institution and in our broader community, and we're happy that all of you have joined us to listen, but also to participate, in the discussion that will ensue.

Now today's talk will feature a robust conversation on how universities can better lead during these fractured times and develop a stronger sense of constructive civic habits. After I introduce you to our featured speaker today, I'll invite our own Jonathan Adler, who is an expert in constitutional law, to help me moderate today's discussion and later the Q and A session with our audience. Now, before we move on, I have some people to thank. I want to thank our partners on this event, and they include the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence, right here at Case Western Reserve University, as well as the Cuyahoga County Public Library. We're

very happy to have you as a partner, and we absolutely couldn't do this event without you. We're also gratefully and incredibly happy that you're supporting not only this event, but our partnership in trying to work with our surrounding community for a better Cleveland and a better Northeast Ohio. I also want to thank as well and mention the Academy of Arts and Sciences who recently had a Commission on Our Common Purpose—that's the title of the commission—really to help promote a healthier civic dialogue in the United States. Their report was actually inspirational for the formation of this North Star seminar series. Now, without further ado, it is my pleasure today to introduce today's featured speaker.

Rueben Brigety II Is the seventeenth vice chancellor and president of the University of the South. Now he is bringing inspirational leadership to this institution that's also known as Sewanee. And this institution, actually, for those of you who don't know it, has a reputation for producing Rhodes Scholars, Watson Fellows, Fulbrighters, and has a partnership with Yale University itself. It's a jewel of an educational institution in the south, but it's also a place that has been deep in the conversation of reckoning with its own past as have many institutions of higher education in this moment. Now before becoming vice chancellor and president of the University of the South, he served as dean of the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University. Prior to that he served as a US ambassador to the African Union, where he served for two years. Now in that role he managed the strategic partnership between the United States and the African Union, with an emphasis on democracy and governance, economic growth, and development. He also served as the permanent representative of the United States to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and earlier as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and the Bureau of African Affairs. Prior to his work in the policy arena, he was an assistant professor of government and politics at the George Mason University and before that he taught international relations at the School of International Service at American University. Before entering academia, he conducted research missions in Afghanistan and Iraq with the arms division of the Human Rights Watch. A native of Jacksonville, Florida, he is a distinguished midshipman graduate of the US Naval Academy and holds a master's degree in philosophy, as well as a PhD in international relations from the University of Cambridge. Without further ado, I'm pleased to welcome my friend, my colleague Rueben Brigety.

REUBEN BRIGETY: Well Dean Vincent, it's an honor to be with you, and I'm pleased to say, in front of all who are gathered that as far as I'm concerned,

you're amongst the best leaders in American higher education today. I'll say that for free. You don't have to send me a check. Because it's true. I'm also delighted to see on the Zoom call my old dear friend of long standing, Dr. Shannon French, who is the director of the Inamori Center for Ethics at Case Western, and Professor Adler, it's an honor to be here with you as well.

So, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for having me I can just say just a few words to start and then I look forward to robust question and answer session. So as the Provost Vinson, I called you dean, didn't I? My bad, I'm sorry. I'm back to our old starts guys. As Provost Vinson mentioned, this is a time for talking in America. It has to be. I'm very heartened to hear of the philosophy behind the North Star speaker series. It is similar to the one that we have here at Sewanee, the University of the South. Sewanee was founded by churchmen, and they were all men at time, by the Episcopal church and our founding philosophy, our motto, is the first verse of the hundred and thirty-third psalm which in Latin says: *Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum!*, which we call EQB for short, and translated, means behold, how good and pleasing it is when kindred dwell together in unity. In the philosophy, underlying that song, is that, notwithstanding our various differences indeed behold, how good and pleasing it is when we find a way, that notwithstanding our differences, to do all together. In our country, right now is that a moment of profound fracture. We are at, one might argue, the apotheosis of decades of political warfare that have caused members of opposite political parties to see each other as adversaries more than as fellow citizens. The nature of the coronavirus pandemic and the politicization of its response have seemed to only heighten those tensions. And for a variety of reasons, we also find ourselves at a moment of profound reckoning on matters of race, the likes of which we have not seen in at least a generation. I have spoken and written about many of these things for years and, if you allow me a shameless plug, in the latest edition of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, which literally just came out yesterday, I have an article that is titled "The Fractured Power: How to Overcome Tribalism." And it draws on years of experience and how the United States is engaged with other countries around the world that have been riven by a sectarian conflict and seeks to draw lessons from those diplomatic experiences that we may apply to ourselves, not only as a means of trying to heal our own divisions, but also crucially, from my perspective as a foreign affairs expert, as a means of strengthening American soft power so that we may have the moral example of managing our

multi-ethnic democracy in a way that bolsters our moral credibility and addressing these challenges elsewhere in the world.

As Provost Vincent said, I am the vice chancellor and president of the University of the South which was founded initially in 1858. Not only to be a center of learning here in the antebellum south, but also as our own historical archival research suggested, is the only university in the United States that was created specifically for the purposes of advancing the interests and superiority of the slave-holding culture and the ideology of white supremacy underlying it. Then the Civil War happened, then everything went up in smoke, and then the university was re-founded in 1868 here on the mountaintop in Sewanee, Tennessee. And for the first century of our existence, in addition to being in place of learning that, as Provost Vinson mentioned, distinguished itself not only through the number of per capita Rhodes Scholars we have, and so many other people that have gone on to distinguished fields and all manner of endeavor. Sewanee was also, self-consciously, a child of the old confederacy and a keeper of the flame of a lost cause for a century, only graduating its first singular African American graduate in 1970—a year after Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. Now, since then, guided by the Episcopal roots that anchor this institution, our university has made enormous strides, not only in reckoning with its past, but also providing a way to a future.

When I was named, elected as the seventeenth vice chancellor, almost a year ago now on February 28, 2020, the very last day of Black History month, that was just two weeks before coronavirus pandemic exploded. So, in that two-week interregnum, I was obviously, as any new university president was thinking about, thinking about how to advance the future of the university, enrollment, and financing a curriculum, and all those sorts of things, and hope to not talk about the whole race thing for a while, maybe they just wouldn't notice I was Black for a little bit. So you get to know me a little while before we can start to have those sort of more challenging conversations. And then the coronavirus pandemic happened. We had to evacuate our university, and, like every other higher education leader, I had to walk in the door trying to figure out how we were going to conduct our educational mission in the midst of a global pandemic of biblical proportions the likes of which we hadn't seen in a century.

And then on May 31 Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeled on the neck of George Floyd in the middle of daylight, with his knee and his full body weight for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Such that this

grown man was crying for his dead mama as the life was squeezed out of him. And when the video of that was distributed, the world exploded with protest from Reykjavik to Rochester from Wellington to Washington, the likes of which the world had never seen, in spontaneous outrage across the globe on a single issue, and this issue was demanding that everybody treated be with basic humanity regardless of their race. And that was also the context within which I started my presidency. The first African American [president] of the University of the South walking into a global pandemic and the most profound racial reckoning that we had seen since 1968. It's a thing, and it's been a challenge. And I would say that, amongst the things that I've been most heartened by, has been the willingness of this university and this community to stand up and face those challenges, culminating on the racial bit with our Board of Regents on September 8 issuing a bold statement declaring categorically that we fundamentally repudiate our past veneration of the confederacy in the ideology of white supremacy underlaying it and, crucially, directing us to become a center for truth and reconciliation on matters of race in the American south and to be a model for diversity, equity, and inclusion in America. That's our charge. And so we're in the beginning of the process of figuring out how we continue to do that. And, just like you are guided by your North Star, we will be guided by our guiding principle of EQB to figure out how we can have these challenging conversations and still dwell together in unity. So thank you for the opportunity to make a few opening remarks, and I look forward to the conversation.

VINSON: Reuben, that is a penetrating beginning. I think you're certainly getting a lot of questions that are starting to brew in our audience. Before we get to their questions, we wanted to have a chance to have a little bit further dialogue with you, to get to know you even a little bit better. And to help me with that process, I have invited my esteemed colleague, Jonathan Adler. Professor Adler is the inaugural Johan Verheij Memorial professor of law and director of the Coleman P. Burke Center for Environmental Law here at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, and he teaches courses in environmental, administrative, and constitutional law. Professor Adler is the author of—or editor of—at least seven books and has testified before Congress numerous times and has been actually identified, in 2016, as the most cited legal academic and administrative and environmental law under the age of fifty. He has most recently been cited in the newly released US House impeachment report. Among other things, he is a regular commentator on numerous radio and TV programs, including PBS, NPR, Fox, and as I've

recently shared with him some insights, even on *Entertainment Tonight* and those of you in our Case Western Reserve community are going to have to get to know that that story a little bit more. But Professor Adler, welcome. Before we get into a series of about six questions that we're going to pose to you, Rueben, designed to get to know you even a little bit better to get our audience to understand some of the issues from a deeper perspective before opening it up to them, I would like Professor Adler, if you wouldn't mind, just saying a couple of words.

JONATHAN ADLER: Well, thank you Ben, it's really a privilege and an honor to be part of this conversation, and it's fabulous to have Dr. Brigety here, if only virtually, in Cleveland. In the future we'll have to host you in person, when we can do that. But to be part of this conversation on issues that really matter so much for our country, for our communities, and as I think we're going to explore a little bit, for universities. Because I'm certainly among those that think that universities have a distinct role to play in figuring out how to deal with some of the tribal conflicts that our country is embroiled in and how we come through these conflicts in a better place, so I don't really want to take much time at this point. I just did want to reiterate that you know how much of an honor it is to be part of this conversation, how pleased we are that that Dr. Brigety with his range of experience, both his current experience at the University of the South, as well as his experience as a diplomat and in the State Department, as well as an academic and a member of the academy, the range of perspectives that brings to bear on these issues, and one of the things I look forward to particular to exploring, this notion which, I think, which started Dr. Brigety's article in *Foreign Affairs* poses and raises, which I think is important, but I think it's also challenging, which is thinking about the conflicts that the United States is wrestling with. A bit in the way that the United States has viewed conflicts in other countries, and given the history of American exceptionalism, given the way that we, the United States, tended to want to think of ourselves that's a provocative and challenging frame, and one that I look forward to our being able to explore in the conversation. But I'll stop there, because I really want to leave time for us to really engage with Dr. Brigety as much as we can.

VINSON: Well, thank you, Jonathan and I look forward to hearing what you've got to say and help us get a little bit deeper with Dr. Brigety. But President Brigety, every university leader brings their history, brings their experiences, and helps articulate and pivot and institution in a variety of

ways, given that set of experiences that they bring to the table, you have some incredible assets. As a diplomat, as an ambassador to the African Union, What important lessons in healthy civic dialogue have you learned along the way? In your career path, especially in those areas where youth you've been in Africa you've been in the heart of so many struggles, how do you take from those experiences to improve civic dialogue in the university? What lessons do you draw from your path?

BRIGETY: Sure, it's a good question. So you read a bit about my biography and the various things I've done my peripatetic career. My father says, I can't seem to keep a job. And as its kind of turned out right, I mean, notwithstanding all these various things that I've had the opportunity to do, a kind of through line in it, for me, which I think this kind of as I approach firmly middle age, is a commitment to fundamental human dignity. Which is something that I think comes from my own background and upbringing in the South, in the southern Baptist tradition, as a student of the civil rights movement, as the son of all of my parents, aunties, uncles, whatever that fought that generation of the fight to expand the beloved community, from the words Martin Luther King. So I think that's sort of my entering argument frankly. I would also say . . . so going to the Naval Academy was my dream come true, I didn't apply anywhere else to college besides Annapolis. Shannon French can verify that I'm telling the truth.

SHANNON FRENCH: I do verify that.

BRIGETY: And the Naval Academy is a very special place and, notwithstanding all the other things that I've done, I mean, I think that it probably is still very much defines who I am. You can't wash that off. You're not supposed to, in fact. You know I hear when I'm making some of the decisions around here. I hear sometimes from folks, Brigety doesn't understand—it's not the Naval Academy. He can't just call it an airstrike on a fraternity house because he doesn't like how they didn't clean up their stuff, right? And like my view is I'm not calling an airstrike on anybody. But the one of the fundamental, foundational principles that I learned at Annapolis is accountability. You are, in every circumstance, accountable for yourself, accountable for your team, and accountable for how you expand your mission, and I would say to this point, accountable for how you engage and accountable for what you say. Because words matter, and they have power. And I think inculcating that sense of accountability in our discussion is very important. You know, one of the things I say to people around here all the

time is you will never hear me use the phrase college kids. These are not college kids they are college adults, young adults, absolutely, inexperienced, yes, foolish, occasionally, but adults nonetheless. And as adults, you are always, in every circumstance, accountable for your actions. And that's a lesson that has to be reinforced. The third thing I would say, the skill that I learned in various parts of my practice, but diplomatic and otherwise, is the importance of proactively seeking human connection.

No matter what your differences, you can find something in common with anybody. You might have to try harder, but you can. And I have done that sitting on the ground, eating Afghan flatbread with people in the northern parts of Afghanistan. I have done it with local tribesmen in Iraq. I have done it across negotiating tables in Geneva. I've done it at refugee camps in Congo, and I have done it with southerners here on the mountain in Sewanee. And so in diplomatic practice, you say that trust is the coin of the realm, and you can't surge trust. You have to build it before you need it. And you begin to develop that just like you build a fire. I mean you find a tiny little spark, which is that essence of human connection because everybody's got a boss, everybody's got a mother-in-law, everybody's got kids that drive you crazy. You can find something on which to build commonality. You know this, to build a relationship and just build the foundation for creating mutual understanding.

VINSON: Thank you, thank you for that. I'm going to turn it over to Jonathan to see if there's a question you have.

ADLER: Yes, so I wanted to turn to the *Foreign Affairs* article which conveniently came out just in time for this program, which I recommend to folks, which talks about the conflicts that we're dealing with political and otherwise United States today as tribal conflicts and talks about the lessons that you've learned from your work as a diplomat and the like and how tribalism can be overcome. I was hoping you would walk us through a little bit of the argument of the article and, in particular, what we should be thinking and how we should be approaching these issues as citizens, as members of an academic community, to play our part in trying to reduce and overcome tribal conflict within the United States.

BRIGETY: Sure, well, I think, probably the most important thing to know about that article is I wrote it before the January 6 assault on the Capitol. And I also wrote it after a shorter piece that was published on foreignaffairs.com in October leading up to the presidential election which said that, as an American diplomat, if we saw any number of these sorts of things happening

any other country—highly charged political environment, a highly armed society, media that is increasingly populated by hate speech dehumanizing the other, we would be ringing the diplomatic alarm bells at the highest levels of government. And, frankly, in advance of the January 6 riots, I wish I had been really, really wrong. But it only goes to serve to show the seriousness of our crisis of democratic governance, where we narrowly dodged a bullet.

And look, this is a separate question from whether you're republican or democrat. Separate question from you know what's your views on health care or taxation or anything else like that. Right, in fact, that's exactly the point, because the definition of tribalism is when people within a polity go to foundational identities and govern their politics on the basis of those identities, such that they trump, such that they are more salient, than overarching empirically identifying ideals and data. Such that those lines become impermeable even when the principles at stake or the evidence in question would otherwise lead a more reasonable person to find a possibility of a political compromise on a particular issue set. And so we have seen these sorts of foundational approaches to politics rip countries apart in Northern Ireland, in South Africa, in Timor Leste, in Iraq, postwar Iraq, in other places, in the Balkans, etc. And as you're the oldest constitutional democracy in the world, we not only like to think that that notion of tribalism doesn't apply to us, but quite frankly that because of the advancement of our democracy, we have lessons to teach other people. When, in fact, a series of empirical data suggests that our own political lodge are becoming so hardened as to essentially not simply resemble but to be defined by this notion of tribalism, right up to, and including, armed conflict.

The FBI noted in 2019 we have the highest rate of violent ethnic and religious-based hate crimes on record with the highest fatality rate, with the one exception being 1995 with the blowing up the Oklahoma City bombing, which was the Oklahoma City, which is such a particular event, but the trend line has gotten dramatically worse. We've seen the highest rates of firearm purchases in American history and the highest rates of firearm purchase amongst African Americans ever concerned about being subjected to racial violence. And so the data, I would argue, are compelling, in terms of laying out the danger in which our country finds itself, right now, which again it's not a partisan argument. In fact it's a fundamentally American argument for those who care deeply about the nature of our democratic experiment, which is not predestined to be eternal. It depends on what we do, which then leads to the second point to your question, professor, so what's the average person to do? So I lay out a series of things to consider. The first

is the one lesson we know from every circumstance is that leadership matters. It matters immensely. And by leadership we mean the ability of people to reach beyond sectarian divisions, to face down not only their adversaries, but also, quite frankly, their allies who would otherwise prefer to be rooted and grounded in their tribal bastions for the purpose of building a stronger, multi-confessional, polity. Whether that be Gary Adams and David Trimble negotiating for the Good Friday Agreement or F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela. Mandela, in particular, but de Klerk also gets credit as well, has to be said for making the hard political calculations that he needed to make in order to dismantle apartheid in South Africa 1994. Or Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993 and what seemed like the dawn of a potential final middle peace deal, which only sort of collapsed, for a variety of reasons. And so, and here's the thing, leaders respond to their people as much as they lead them, which means that as citizens, we ought to be demanding leaders that will find a way to cross the tribal lines of our society. Not to throw our individual principles away, not to have an imaginary kind of kumbaya version in which differences simply magically disappear, but they will find a way to help make our institutions work again, notwithstanding our differences. The beautiful thing about democracy is that people, elected officials are responsive to the ballot box. And we have to hold our folks accountable. It's especially true in an environment where our government is founded on the good side of the government, which leads to the second point. You also cannot underestimate the importance of civic society organizations on the ground. So as much as leaders in high political positions obviously have great import, so do those that are making individual connections and small individual communities. In church groups and in business associations and athletic groups that are finding ways to make connections with each other, so one of the things that Provost Vincent did not mention in his too-generous biography of me is that I'm an active volunteer at the Boy Scouts of America. I was a scout as a boy—I did not make Eagle Scout, which is a regret that I continue to live with to this day. One might argue the reason I'm an adult scout leader is to work out some of those demons for not making an Eagle Scout, but whatever right we'll save that for another day. But one of the one of the other reasons that I love, being an adult Scouter is that I find myself in constant connection with other adult leaders from walks of life that I otherwise not engage. Whose political views, whose religious backgrounds, whose economic circumstances are different from mine, and yet we actually find ourselves together around a core set of principles that are articulated within the scouting movement and with a core combined mission, which is to help educate and train these

young people into being good citizens of tomorrow. And I would submit that there are lots of other ways for individuals to kind of find that, but yet, but we, but democracy is not a spectator sport, right, we have to get after it, get into it. And then there were a couple of other things that I mentioned, with the guards who, you know, structural aspects of our of our democracy that that I would argue, actually, essential that that helped to keep or improve tribal divisions, but I would say, those are the two most important things as citizens, that everybody on this call can do, demand that we have leaders that overcome tribal barriers and find ways in your own grassroots communities to break down those barriers on your own.

VINSON: President Brigety, very, very penetrating thoughts here. I think you are getting everyone excited about going out to get that article and read that article. Professor Adler and I are going to close with one question each and we're going to keep it somewhat simple before we open it up to the audience and hopefully have about fifteen minutes or so for their questions. Please audience, get your questions ready and we're going to set manage those over chat. So if you could begin to put your questions on chat. Jocelynn Clemings will help me, she's from my office, will help me manage those questions for me. I'm going to give you a quick one.

Even if you are a university president, you have seen dialogue work well and break down, you have theorized these things, What our universities to do? What is our role?

BRIGETY: I saw an article yesterday that was written in 2018 that quoted Admiral McRaven who was in command of the military operation that killed Osama bin Laden and then went on to command all US special operations forces and then after he retired was chancellor for the University of Texas system. So this man who's a career Navy Seal, toughest of the toughest Navy Seals, commanded all US Special Operations Forces across the entire military said that being a university president is the toughest job in America. Precisely in part, for precisely this sort of reason right, what do you do, I mean, how do you balance, particularly in a free society like ours, the notion of free speech to the maximum extent possible, while also drawing the boundaries of community?

Because, by definition, communities have boundaries. That's how you know if you're in them or you're out of them. We also, as places that are meant to be places of full free inquiry, also want to guard against creating a certain set of orthodoxies that prevent or preclude, falling truth wherever somebody may find that truth. All of which is made more complicated in

environments, as we are today, where people can freely assert that some facts matter, and there are other alternative facts which also matter. If we can't agree on some kind of basic empirical truth, and that's hard. So I guess that that's a hard, that's a long way of saying that we have to be in the constantly evolving business of asserting what are the maximum broad values of a community that allows engagement, but also making clear that there are boundaries.

I will give you an example. So, regrettably, recently, here at the University of the South, notwithstanding all of the amazing things about our university, my family has been subjected to some harassment by unknown persons, doing disrespectful things repeatedly at our home, the president's residence, at night. Now, as these things continued, I bore them silently until for a variety of reasons, I felt that I could no longer do so. And so I gave a sermon in our Chapel, a speech in our Chapel here last Sunday, not this past Sunday, the Sunday before, basically saying these are tough times. I understand that a lot of people are upset about an awful lot of things, and many of them have made their concerns known to me some more respectful ways some and more visceral ways. But here is the line, back up off my family and our home. I forgive you, in the spirit of Christian charity, not even knowing who you are what the motivations were for why you're doing what you're doing. But we will not have this, and, crucially, we will be a place where everybody, regardless of station, whether they're the vice chancellor or they're not whatever station, maybe, where everybody, where we insist that everybody is treated with dignity and decency. We can disagree, we can disagree vehemently, but we have to engage each other in a way that advances our common bonds of kinship. Now, how a particular university community both asserts those boundaries while also allowing an encouraging freedom within them, this is obviously just like any other family would, like any other marriage would, this is a uniquely personal conversation, even as it as one that is common enough that we can understand it and see it, what makes certain families functional what makes others dysfunctional. And so that's what I would say what has to be done, and that it changes in every circumstance.

VINSON: Thank you, thank you for that. I'm going to pass it over to Jonathan for the final question from us, and then we're going to go straight to the audience and Jocelynn will manage that.

ADLER: I wanted to follow up on those remarks and maybe push a little bit. Certainly universities have a unique and distinct role to play as places where civic engagement can occur, where conversations across various differences can occur. Certainly today at universities, like the University of the South,

like Case Western, people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences are put together in a way that that might not have occurred before or after there at the university. And that creates unique opportunities both to provide a forum for civic engagement as well as to help train people how to engage with those who they think of as different and to engage with them as equals and as fellow citizens, as opposed to as the other. At the same time, universities are often under pressure, both internally and externally, to take a stand, to assert a position beyond the narrow concerns of what we traditionally think of as academic matters. I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about your view about how universities should balance those potentially competing considerations. And just lastly, one reason that comes to mind from your article is when the United States is dealing with tribal conflicts in other countries, we're the outsider, and so we can play the role of trying to encourage civic engagement without taking a side. But none of us are outsiders to the conflicts and divisions that occur within the United States, and so I'm just wondering how you see universities should balance that role, on the one hand, of being the place for civic engagement, but on the other hand, being institutions that will often feel compelled to align themselves with particular values or conceptions of justice that seem particularly important.

BRIGETY: That is such a hard question, it is such a very hard question. I've been in the job eight months, so I clearly don't have enough of a track record, but I will say this. I will say it from the perspective of both my current position and a previous one, when I was dean at the Elliott School. The first is that I believe that institutions have to have defined values. Here's the thing, let me say it differently, every institution has them, whether it has them assertively and self-consciously, or it simply has them by virtue of what it dodges or what it doesn't do, everybody has them. And so the right starting point is for every institution to sort of assert what its baseline values are and what it will tolerate and what it won't, which then helps you answer the secondary question, so if these are our values, how do you decide when to engage and when not to engage. Particularly as when you choose not to engage that is at least as much of a message on anything as when you choose to engage and knowing that everybody's always going to have a view. Sewanee, what I like to call the Sewanee-verse. All those people that know and love Sewanee, both our students here our alumni, whatever, Sewanee-verse is a very retail place where everybody's got a view on everything. It feels a prerogative to express them directly to vice chancellor, regularly. So the way in which I have approached this, thus far, and I'll give you some lessons of what I've

learned, are, one, again we have begun and continue to be in the process of asserting and reasserting our values and leaning into those as a baseline of what our expectations are as sort of our conduct here. Second is, there are a billion things happening in the world on any given day that even if you assert those values suggests that you want to comment on them, right? And so the ways in which I try to distinguish that are what are those things that are directly tied to our values that are also clearly and incontrovertibly tied to our university.

Let me give you a recent example. So in the days following the assault, the seditious assault on the Capitol on January 6, and we started to learn a bit more about who these people were. It turns out amongst the very first group of people to be arrested and identified was a graduate of Sewanee, class of 1990. The man named Cleveland Meredith, it's all public information, so I'm not say anything that wasn't shared. He is accused of having publicly declared that he was going to put a bullet in Nancy Pelosi's noggin on national television. And he was arrested with a semi-automatic rifle and a pistol with 2,500 rounds of ammunition in a hotel room in Washington, DC. Now, when the riot first happened, we convened an emergency meeting here of the senior staff to ask, let's just kind of review our security procedures, and make sure that we're all good and should we say anything about the riot because the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church, the most Reverend Michael Curry, did say something. We decided, no. Yes, we have our own values, but there is nothing that is particularly, directly related to Sewanee that we should say something about, so we didn't. And then, after about forty-eight hours, it became clear that this gentleman, Cleveland Meredith, was involved and, therefore, and that that information was being promulgated in the Sewanee-verse, so then we decided we had to make a statement. Issued what I thought was an incredibly reasonable statement, like everybody else and came under my signature, which is relevant, right?

One, like all Americans, I was shocked and saddened to see what happened on the Capitol steps. Two, we all have an obligation for civil discourse, as our presiding Bishop said. Democracy is a sacred trust has to be protected, and three, we know of as well, we know that there is a Sewanee graduate who's been implicated. We will follow the facts as they develop. Simple, reasonable, completely anodyne, in my view. And then I got a ton of email back saying why didn't you say anything during Black Lives Matter. Right? If this is really what you believe, why didn't you say anything when these Black Lives Matter and antifa protesters are burning down Portland and

Washington and whatever else. Now, fortunately, I could write back and did and say actually I did say those things. I said them on my very first speech on my very first day in office, and I said that again, later at the end of the summer during a sermon that I preach in Christchurch Cathedral about the importance of civil discourse, as we engage these issues and why I personally denounce political violence in any circumstance. There are folks who didn't want to hear that. All they wanted to be able to assert was that I cared and was prepared to denounce people that were storming the Capitol for whatever reasons they thought to be righteous, but I was letting these Black Lives Matter people off the hook. And so that's a long way of saying that you'll never get it right. And if you're never going to get it right, I have long since come to the view that I could declare that it is Tuesday on a Tuesday and have some non-trivial portion of the Sewanee-verse take issue with that assertion. And so you're going to take heat anyway, you may as well do so in a way that you can live with yourself with. And the way in which I think about this is, is it consistent with the values that were articulated, and is it directly relevant to our university, and everybody else can make their own judgments.

VINSON: President Brigety, we've gotten to that time. We do have a little bit of time for questions. I'm gonna allow Jocelynn to please manage that. And for those who would like to, I think if you're able to, President Brigety and Jonathan, if we can maybe have an extra five minutes, if possible, but Jocelynn.

JOCELYNN CLEMINGS: All right, Shannon we're going to start with you. You had your hand up earlier, I know you have a burning question, you can go ahead and unmute yourself as well.

FRENCH: Gotcha, thank you, I will try to be quick, though, because we have so little time, and I know there's lots of burning questions out there. And first Reuben, thank you again. So many helpful and genuinely helpful and inspirational and insightful comments here today, thank you for all of us, but I would also want to ask your thoughts. You've made it clear, and I agree with you, that we're trying to shape freedom within certain boundaries. But I do worry that there's so much language now being used by well-intentioned people about civic discourse and so forth, that we're actually not holding those boundaries hard enough, and we're not making enough of a point about how you do not need to engage with certain people. You do not need to have a conversation with, for example, someone who denies your fundamental rights. You know if someone is denying my

rights, they're not just disagreeing with me. And I I've had this come up in so many interesting contexts, including, most recently, someone being very frustrated in the military. As a woman, being asked to again, defend publicly, that women belong in the military. And it was done in the name of civil discourse, so there's a sense I want, I wonder if you can comment on, because I know you've dealt with this of how do we defend people who shouldn't have to be the ones defending their own rights?

BRIGETY: You have just articulated my life, and, crucially, the lives of so many other Americans who've always had to be in the place where they had to defend their very worth. Let me give you two examples. In the last seven months, I've been in this job, my first month on the job I got a call from an alum, class of 1974. You know I told you, the Sewanee-versus is a retail thing. So that anybody can reach out and talk to the vice chancellor, I'm trying to make myself available and engage with folks. And this gentleman after exchanging pleasantries and talking about some curricular matters, he said, well Vice Chancellor, I just want to know that you're going to let all views be heard. I was like, well, what do you mean Coke versus Pepsi. I don't understand all views on what. And he said, you know, like about this like slavery stuff. You know, everybody knows the slavery was bad, but not all slaves were treated badly. Slavery was like the necessary evil to get our country started. I said well, it was evil, but it wasn't necessary. He said well you know, it was a business decision and in business, you have to make tough decisions.

I, verbatim, I'm telling you exactly what this man said, and Vice Chancellor, I expect you to allow all voices to be heard. So within my first month on the job, I am being checked, put in my place, attempted to be put in my place, by an alum who wants to make sure that I will allow the relative merits of slavery to be properly debated at the university under my watch. And I said, of course I would because I believe that the reason debate and checking it against the factually empirical record will do more to help people reach a conclusion than asserting without evidence what one way or the other might be. I'll give you another example. So after I told you about that statement that we sent out about the Capitol riots, and every person we sent back, I personally, or one of my people, usually me, saying, of course, we did, and I personally spoke out against you know file, type, and every circumstance. I got a letter back from one woman from Lexington who is being as charitable as I'm sure she knew how to be. Said thank you very much for that and, by the way, congratulations that they let you be the first Black vice chancellor

of the University of South. They let me be, right? As if I'm saying ladies, congratulations that your husband let you be his wife. Right? And so, one more, one more, why not? I'll give you one more just for the heck of it so.

After my sermon that I gave sort of drawing the line of our boundaries, I got an email from another student. A young lady who's a junior who basically sort of was very apologetic and explaining how her mind had been changed as a result of my sermon and how so much hate speech have been normalized etc, etc. And to apologize, because, as the first Black vice chancellor, she was holding me up to a standard to be in this impossible, perfectly impossible great leader, and that was unfair of her to hold me to that standard. And I'm thinking to myself, I was a brigade commander in the United States Naval Academy. I have a doctorate from one of the oldest and most prestigious universities on campus in the world. I have faced down danger multiple times in multiple hostile environments all around the world. I'm a former United States ambassador, what is it that you think I have to prove to you? Now, let me say this for the record, Sewanee is an incredible place. It is a wonderful place filled with lots of wonderful people, and I would not be here if that were not the case, and I also believe in being honest in dialogue. So that we can all grow to a higher plane of understanding and our engagements with each other. It's a long way of saying, Shannon, that I guess I am probably even a bit more expansive in what I'm prepared to tolerate for the purpose of coming to mutual or better shared understanding, but even as I'm being prepared to tolerate a lot more, I find myself increasingly more and more firm on what the boundaries are.

FRENCH: You're a better person than I am, Reuben. And wow, thank you for those stories. Incredible.

CLEMINGS: Absolutely, thank you for sharing. Matthew, you're up next. You are muted Matthew.

MATTHEW KADISH: Thank you, thank you, sorry I had to find my find my mute button. Reuben, thank you so much for joining us. I'd like to throw a practical question on the table, and if you've had the chat on, which I think you did, because you were kind enough to send us the link, you've had a preview of it, which seems like fair play. I'll read it out for anybody that's not on the chat and, if it's too specific, or too incendiary, then that's fine. I thought I'd throw it out since other people are probably wondering. Since January 6 and the insurrection and given the proliferation of Qanon and mass radicalization in the US, how can we best defuse the

tensions with and from the Trump supporters, and can we or should we?

BRIGETY: Sure, well first, with all due respect, I don't think we were acquainted with each other, so I'd be grateful if you call me doctor or vice chancellor.

KADISH: I apologize for that, sir.

BRIGETY: Ambassador or pick your title.

KADISH: Very good, all right good, correction taken, I apologize.

BRIGETY: Thank you. So look, yes, we have to find a way to engage our fellow citizens. We have got to find a way through this morass because the alternative is a low-grade insurgency. And, and I don't say that lightly. One might reasonably argue that we are already there with the levels of political violence that we are already seeing in this country. Now, I will be also equally honest that in the article, I did not write anything about the role that the media or disinformation plays in creating or tribalism, the reason I didn't because I don't have anything good to say about it. Right, I don't know the answer. I know it's a problem. I know other people have written about it, but I just don't know. I mean, particularly in a country where freedom of speech is amongst the first articulated freedoms on which our republic is based, I don't know how we simultaneously embrace and reinforce that freedom, but also say look it's got to be based on some facts. And, and let us at least try to figure out where the sort of Venn diagram is of a mutual understanding. What I would say is, that what occurs to me, is that a lot of people on both sides, on all sides, I think this is actually increasingly, so many people don't spend any time with any other people that don't think like they do. And it's in an environment like that, where quite frankly conspiracy theories are allowed to breathe. Let me just give you just one final example on this about why it's so important for each of us to engage and draw boundaries. Many of you may know who Dylan Roof is. Dylan Roof was the young man who in 2015 drove from a small town in South Carolina, not unlike, frankly, a lot of small towns that I'm around here right now, and drove to Charleston to the Mother Emanuel AME church to a prayer group on a Wednesday evening. Prayed with ten black parishioners, to include the minister, prayed with them for an hour, and then shot them one by one. Dead. Leaving one of them alive to tell the story. Dylan Roof was a neoconfederate bathed in the ideology of the confederacy and of Rhodesian South Africa. And he was a young man at the time he did it, so he probably was born, I think, in

like 1998 or something like that so it's not like, he was you know from way back in whatever the darkest days of Jim Crow south. And so, his views were clearly known and clearly on display around people in his community. It does not appear that anybody called him on it. And so, this to me is an argument for engaging and remaining engaged with all of our fellow citizens to figure out how we can, just again, like that little sort of spark of fire that I told you about earlier, how we can rebuild some elements of trust and baseline understanding of our community to build and strengthen the center.

KADISH: And sir, if I, if I can circle back to the comment that you made before, which I actually wrote down because I thought it was so penetrating what we feel we need and may desperately want as a surge of trust, but we can't just do, that is what you're saying.

BRIGETY: That's correct.

VINSON: Well, I hate to break this up. Dr. Brigety, you could be here with us all evening and we could benefit from this conversation ritually many times over. This is precisely the North Star that we're looking for. It's precisely the North Star that's going to get us to a better tomorrow. It's precisely the North Star that our universities can embrace, to really help with the necessary uplift of our communities in our nation. I want to thank everyone for being here. I want to thank my colleague, Professor Jonathan Adler, for participating in today's event, I want to remind the audience that we have another conversation coming up just a week from today. And, who will be joining us? It will be the honorable Gil Cisneros, who is a philanthropist, a former US representative from California 39th Congressional district. He also has George Washington University ties. And interestingly, for those of you who play the lottery, his fortune came up through winning the Mega Millions jackpot, and his talk is entitled "Improving Civic Dialogue in America, a Congressman's Perspective" and will feature a conversation on the role of society, universities, private citizens, and our common purpose Thank you once again, President Brigety for gracing us with your presence and your knowledge. And thank you to our audience and hopefully we'll see you next time. Take care guys.