

Overcoming Political Tribalism and Recovering Our American Democracy: A Public Conversation Between John Danforth and Amy Chua

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Andrew Martin:

We benefit greatly from institutions and leaders dedicated to developing strategies for overcoming polarization on every level. The John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics is one such institution, and its benefactor and namesake, Jack Danforth, is one such leader. We are privileged that they along with our law school have brought Amy Chua here tonight. Today, Professor Chua and Senator Danforth will engage in a public conversation.

Before we begin, I'd like to share a little more about each of them. Jack Danforth is an attorney and partner with the law firm of Dowd Bennet. He is also an active and extremely generous patron of numerous public organizations, including this very center which bears his name and aims to promote his highest ideals for excellence in understanding the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. The John C. Danforth Distinguished Professorship within that center is held by Prof. Marie Griffith. Jack and his wife Sally are also the generous donors of another distinguished professorship in law and religion, held by my colleague John Inazu. Here at WashU, we're deeply grateful for their leadership and immense support of this important work. Senator Danforth graduated with honors from Princeton University, where he majored in religion. He received a bachelor of divinity from Yale Divinity School, and a bachelor of law from Yale Law School. He practiced law for some years, then began his political career in 1968, when he was elected Attorney General of Missouri, his first race for public office. He was reelected to that post in 1972. Missouri voters then elected him to the US Senate in 1976, and reelected him in 1982 and 1988 for a total of 18 years of service in the Senate. During that time he initiated major legislation in the areas of international trade, telecommunications, healthcare, research and development, transportation, and civil rights. Following his elected service, Senator Danforth held appointments in both Republican and Democratic administrations. As an ordained Episcopal priest, Senator Danforth has been open about his Christian faith and has presided at many occasions, including the funeral of President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of three books; *Resurrection*; *Faith and Politics: How the moral values debate divides America and how to move forward together*; and *The Relevance of Religion*. Our distinguished guest tonight, Amy Chua, is the John M. Duff Junior Professor of Law at Yale Law School. Prof. Chua received both her AB and JD degrees from Harvard University. While at Harvard Law School, she was executive editor of the Harvard Law Review. She then clerked for Patricia Laud on the US Court of Appeals for the DC circuit. Prior to entering academics in 1994, she practiced with the Wall Street firm of Cleary, Gotlieb, Steery, and Hamilton. Prof. Chua joined the Yale Law School faculty in 2001. Her expertise is in international business transactions, law and

development, ethnic conflict, and globalization in the law. Her first book—*World on Fire, How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Insecurity*—was a New York Times bestseller and selected both by the Economist and the UK's Guardian as the Best Book of 2003. She is also the author of the critically-acclaimed *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance and Why they Fail*, the 2011 memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, and the NYT best seller, *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups*, co-authored with Jeb Rubenfeld. Her latest book, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, looks at tribalism on both the left and the right, and urges Americans to “rediscover an American identity that transcends our political tribes.” The book serves as an inspiration for this evening's conversation, which we'll hear more about in just a moment. Prof. Chua has appeared on leading television programs, including Good Morning America and the Today Show, and has addressed numerous government and policy-making institutions, including the CIA, the World Economic Forum in Davos, and the World Knowledge Forum in Seoul. She has won several awards, including Time Magazines 100 Most Influential People in 2011, and has won Yale Law School's best teaching award. We are truly delighted to have both Senator Danforth and Prof. Chua here tonight for this conversation. As part of the Q and A portion, we will be accepting written questions from the audience. A few students will walk outside the aisles and will be happy to collect your questions throughout the discussion. If you didn't pick up a card and pencil on your way in, there are some at the end of each pew. Dean Staudt from the College of Law will then present some of your questions to Prof. Chua and Senator Danforth as the final portion of the event.

Now, please join me in welcoming Senator Danforth and Prof. Chua to Washington University.

Senator John C. Danforth:

Thank you, Chancellor Martin. Thank you for your hospitality, and thanks everybody for being here. This is, Amy Chua, not your first visit to Washington University. You were here seven years ago in connection with your *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. I've read it; I'm glad I'm not engaging you in conversation on that particular book. Having read it, let me just say, had I been your son, I would have spent my childhood sitting in a corner wearing a dunce cap. This program is prompted by Prof. Chua's more recent book, *Political Tribes*. It's an absolutely terrific book. It's particularly a terrific book for our Center on Religion and Politics because it pertains to politics and for those of us who are of faith, it I think provides some ideas of how we might be constructive in overcoming the political division in our country right now. So, it really is an important book; I highly recommend it. If I were organizing book clubs in local congregations, I would have this as a book club reading, because I think for people in religious congregations, it gives us ideas of how we could be constructive in overcoming some of the divisions in our country. So, Amy, thanks so much for being here. If you would, give us an overview of the book, and you might start with

the title of the book, *Political Tribes*. Why the title, and what's the meaning of the title to you?

Chua:

First of all, Senator, thank you so much for your kind words and invitation and generosity, and thank you all for coming tonight. It's a tremendous pleasure, and an honor, for me to be back here at WashU, having this incredibly important conversation in this stunning venue. And thank you to Marie Griffith and her entire amazing team for organizing everything so perfectly.

So, tribalism, and political tribalism. Let me start by saying that human beings, like our fellow primates, are tribal animals. We need to belong to groups. And once we connect with a group, we tend to want to cling to it and defend it and see our group as better in every way. In a fascinating recent study that I discuss in the group, children between the ages of four and eight were randomly assigned to either the red team or the blue team, and then given T-shirts of corresponding colors. These kids were then shown computer generated images of hundreds of other children, half of them wearing red shirts, and half of them wearing blue shirts. They were then asked questions about these images. The results were stunning. Even though these children, all between four and eight, knew absolutely nothing about the kids in the photographs, they consistently said that they liked the kids wearing their colors better, wanted to allocate more resources to them, and perhaps most frighteningly, displayed systematic subconscious bias. That is, when told stories about these kids, they systematically remembered all the positive things about the kids wearing their color, and tended to remember all the negative things about the kids wearing the other color. So humans aren't just a little tribal; they are very tribal. Once we belong to a group, our identities become oddly bound up with it; we want to benefit our groupmates even though we personally don't gain, and sometimes we enjoy the separateness of outgroup members. Now, having said that, especially in St. Louis with such a great sports team, I want to say that tribalism is not necessarily always bad. Sports is a great example: one of the most tribal things, but it's fun. Family can be very tribal. The problem is when tribalism takes over a political system. That's when get dangerous. Because then you start seeing everything through your group's lens, and arguments, and data, and policy, don't matter. You just want to stick to your group and defend it no matter what, and try to take down the other side. So that's where we are right now in America; that's why we can't get anything done in Washington, we can't even talk to each other. I guess I'll end this part by saying that we're at this point in America where many Americans view those who voted for the other side not just as people they really disagree with and want to argue with, but rather as evil, immoral, un-American: as enemies. That's really a dangerous situation when you feel that way about half of the country.

Danforth:

One-third of college students after the 2016 election unfriended or blocked somebody on social media who voted the wrong way. We all remember Thanksgiving dinners right after the election; people were concerned about their own families. But I'm glad that you said that sports tribalism was okay, we were a little bit concerned that you would come here from New England to St. Louis, and ball us out for our enthusiasm about the Blues winning the Stanley Cup. Thank you.

Some people, nativists, would say we are too tribal, we're too divided, there are too many different groups, they feel that these groups threaten the basic unity of the country, they long for a day when America was identified as a "Christian country" or a "white Anglo-Saxon Protestant country," and they would say the way to overcome this political tribalism is essentially to superimpose on the country a point of view, which is harkening back to the good old days. You wrote a book called *Day of Empire*, and it was a study of the rise and the fall of empires over history, but one thing you said about the rise, the success, of empires, was their ability to build or bring within one country a whole variety of ethnicities, people from different parts of the globe. So, I am certain that what you are not saying is the way to overcome tribalism is to superimpose a uniform "I'm-the-real-American" point of view.

Chua:

Absolutely. So, full disclosure, I'm an immigrant's kid, I've obviously written a whole book about the importance of openness and tolerance, even from just a strategic point of view, but yes, if you did adopt the view—and significant numbers of people say that what's key to being American is having a European background or a Christian background—if we were to adopt that view, Jack, we would lose what is special about America, what has made America great, and what has always made America great from the beginning. I think people tend to forget this, but it's really such an unusual thing that our national identity is not based on the ethnic identity of any one group in this country. I'm a comparativist, so I study China, East Asia, European countries, and most of those countries actually originated as ethnic countries. The national identity is rooted in blood. Not the United States; from the very beginning, our national identity has been rooted in the principals and ideals in our US Constitution. Now, I will be the first to say that we have horrifically failed to live up to those principles and ideals, and we're still struggling to do so. But having said that, I think we often forget just how remarkable a document that was. Even in the founding era, America was incredibly multi-ethnic; there were Germans and Swedes and French and Dutch and Irish and Greeks and Italians speaking different languages; there was enormous religious intolerance; people often identified more as a New Yorker or a Virginian; yet over time, haltingly, the Constitution succeeded in unifying an extremely diverse population under the banner of ideas. As you know, it was quite a radical act not just for the founders to declare freedom of religion, but that there would be no established church. That was very unusual. Again, it was only after the Civil War that the constitution was amended to establish that our national identity would also be ethnically and racially neutral, not just religiously neutral, but the fact remains that if we were to start to define our national identity through race

or religion, whether its whiteness or Christianity, we would be losing what makes America, America. That would be a move in the direction of ethno-nationalism, which is really a force that's torn apart so many countries in the developing world.

Danforth:

You pointed out in this book, *Political Tribes*, that in our constitution, in the 14th amendment, it's very clear that you are an American simply because you're born here. I think you also say that it's unthinkable in France that people would think of themselves as German-French. But in our country, it's very common to say someone is an Irish-American, or a German-American, simply because they are in this place.

Chua:

Yeah, so I introduced this term. I think we all take for granted what we have in this country. We have so many problems, and it's a pretty polarized time. But America is what I call a supergroup: the definition is very easy. To be a supergroup, first you need a very strong overarching identity, like "American," or "Chinese." A lot of countries have this. But to be a supergroup, you also have to have your citizenship open to people of any background, and to let people's individual subgroup identities flourish. So at its best—and again, this is very unusual—at its best, America is a country where someone can be Libyan-American or Croatian-American or Irish-American or Japanese-American—and still intensely patriotic at the same time. It's obvious a country like China is not a supergroup, because they satisfy the first requirement—very powerful Chinese ethnic identity—but subgroup identities, like the Tibetans or the Weagers, are not allowed to flourish. What I was writing about is even a country like France, which has so much in common with us right now—it's a Western democracy—France is also not a supergroup. France has a very strong overarching French identity, but because of the principle of *laissez*, you have the berkini ban, the headscarf ban, it's very different. Subgroup identities are not allowed to flourish in the same way. Religious freedom, for example. And many people think that the stifling of those identities, whether they're from North Africa or Muslim communities, has contributed to the hostility and the failure to assimilate. So that's at our best, but the supergroup status is something that's being challenged by the right and the left. Are we still going to have this overarching identity that can connect all of us as we get more and more demographically diverse, and are we going to be a country that is secure enough to let individual subethnicities and subreligious identities to flourish.

Danforth:

So talk about when tribalism really becomes a dark force, when it runs amok. What are the manifestations of that, what are the symptoms of tribalism, the kind of tribalism that you're questioning in the book?

Chua:

One thing that I've already mentioned is how there used to be so much more overlap between Democrats and Republicans. There's a statistic, it's something like 80% of Democrats would feel incredibly negative if their child married someone of the other party, and vice versa. Once you have that, it's almost like an ethnic difference. We all remember those times. One other thing you see right now that's different even from the last fifty years is a very explicit kind of identity politics on both sides of the political spectrum. We've always had identity politics if you define that as movements based on group identity. But it's very particular right now. So, I see this so starkly—well, on the right, we are seeing openly white nationalist movements, holding rallies and conferences, in a way that would have been shocking even 5 years ago. Being covered in the Atlantic? Even on the mainstream right, even if people don't admit it, there is enormous anxiety and fear about whites, and particularly white men, losing their place in this country. And President Trump has really done an effective job tapping into that fear. Always highlighting the freshmen congresswomen—he wants to make them the face of the Democratic party. Now, on the left, what's interesting is that we are seeing a very sharp shift away from inclusivity as a watch-word to a much more exclusionary approach. It is so stark, I mean I'm on a college campus here, but it's so stark on the college campus where I teach. It's different even from five years ago. There's so much self-segregation by students—by race, by ethnicity, by political view, by religion—the group lines have really hardened. And I'm completely in favor of there being spaces for people to feel solidarity, I think that's great. But what I used to notice is you needed forums for people to debate and get together and cross those boundaries and relate in a different way, and now that's so much more difficult. There's a policing of group boundaries, where you're called out—this is the tribal part—even if you're very progressive but you just have a friend who is a member of the other side, you may not be fully a member of your group. We might have to shame you or bully you; it's sort of like, toe the line completely, or else you're out of the tribe. And that makes it very hard. I've had some success, but you really have to structure it and force these conversations. The whole idea of cultural appropriation is again really based on very hard group lines. These are our group symbols, our group's patrimony, and other groups don't have a right to them. When I was growing up, it was a sign of multicultural openness, for say a Caucasian woman to wear a sari or a kimono; today those would be acts of micro-aggression. It's very interesting to note that this is a very stark shift on the progressive side. If you think of the Civil Rights movement of the 60s and 70s, or even the International Human Rights Movements of the 1990s and 2000s, those groups and movements were really framed in terms of universalist ideals, they were inclusionary, the goal was always to transcend group lines, not to emphasize them. So that's one thing you're seeing, and another thing you're seeing that I can talk more about later is a fracturing on both sides of the political spectrum. Because when you get tribal, it's natural for the teams to get smaller and smaller. You see splintering with ever small groups pinning themselves against each other and contributing to this very toxic political atmosphere.

Danforth:

It wasn't very long ago that the great liberal standard was integration. That was what we were working for, right? That was the Civil Rights Movement as I understood it back in the 60s. Is that gone now?

Chua:

Well, it's tricky. Again, we've definitely seen a proliferation—and again, I understand this, I understand how everything is much more subtle than the way the echo chambers want to make it. I understand the desire for small groups to say, "I want to be with people that really have experienced my form of exclusion." But the key, and this is kind of related to the supergroup idea, is that I think it's a false choice. I think you can have both. What I like about the supergroup idea is that I think it's great for people to feel really proud of their Italian identity, or their Syrian background, but because we're a supergroup, I think we shouldn't have to have only a strong, overarching national identity and everyone has to assimilate to the liberal ideal. I don't think we have to do that. I think we have a system that allows both. I think we can allow multicultural flourishing as long as we have this connective tissue, this overarching national identity, that ties us together. And I think that has to be the Constitution, which is something that worries me, because from both the left and the right I see that the Constitution, which I think is our only help, has now come into the crosshairs of tribalism. For a lot of my progressive students, the Constitution is irredeemably stained by the sins of its authors. I was talking to the headmaster of a very elite private school in New York City, and he was in distress, he said, "The majority of my students here have nothing but disdain for the founding fathers. White, male rapists." And at the University of Virginia in 2016, the president of the university sent out an email quoting Thomas Jefferson, who was the founder of the university, and immediately 469 faculty and students signed a letter saying they were deeply offended by the use of Thomas Jefferson as an example of a moral compass. I think that's very problematic, because it is true that Jefferson and George Washington were slave owners, that is true, we can't whitewash our history. But they were also authors of a document that led to the most inclusive form of government in human history. So I worry that we've overcorrected, throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Danforth:

In my mind, one of the real problems of the negatives of where we are today, tribalism, is the desire to pick fights with individuals. In other words, you believe in a cause, whatever the cause is, a worthy cause, an excellent cause, but for some reason it's important to personalize the opposition and to call out people for being bad people, evil people, if they don't agree with you. So, you're quick to take offense, there's a quickness to look for something in a person's past, something that a person has said, a position that a person has taken, and to use that as a weapon against that person. So you move from just supporting a cause—justice—to demonizing, picking on an individual. Let's say—I am not of this party, but when Joe Biden was singled

out because decades ago he had taken a position on bussing, and suddenly that's transformed into, "Well, you're a racist." I know on university campuses the Halloween costume at Yale, where as I understand it, a member of Yale faculty, a woman, took the position that the university should not be in the business of sending out some message about Halloween costumes. And suddenly that person came under attack as some physical attack. I think you've had an experience like this.

Chua:

I have, and there are some really interesting studies I write about in the book. It's very much a group, mob mentality. Now, we know it's related to neuro-transmitters, there's something physiological about this. If you're just one person confronting Erica Kristoffis about the Halloween costume, it just wouldn't have escalated like that. It is something about being in this culture where you're really part of a group mentality, and the incentives are all wrong, because if one person were to stand up and be brave and say, "Actually, I don't even think she was quite saying that, I think she was feeling it out," then that person would be shamed and bullied. So, the incentive structure on a college campus, where we want debate—which is actually why we became professors—I feel it myself, I'm just going to be much more careful now because the upside is not as big as the downside, and I think that's a shame. People are afraid to express themselves. I had a former student of your law school say to me recently that with regard to being on campus, that his idea of getting through is to just keep his head down. Don't speak. If you have a different view, don't you dare state that different view, because then you are going to be shamed.

Chua:

I still think that leadership is very important. I have historically been very proud of having one of the most diverse classes at Yale Law School—it's called International Business Transactions—but it's developed a reputation, last time I taught it I had sixteen members of the Black Student Association, nine Muslim-Americans, and also fifteen members of the Federalist Society, which is the conservative student group. And I always felt like if you, as the leader, if you set the ground rules, I would say, "here are the ground rules. We can freely disagree, but if somebody says something that seems to offend you, can you just for this one class, don't assume the worst—that he was a racist or trying to hurt you—but that maybe he didn't have the right vocabulary, said something wrong, regrets it. You will have full time to speak." And if you set the rules, I'm still an optimist at heart; I feel like if you can de-escalate and have people start to interact as human beings, the studies show that enormous progress can be made.

Danforth:

The problem that you talked about and that you write about, tribalism, that's, I think, relatively new—or maybe I was just asleep and didn't notice it. But I spent a

lot of my life in politics, which is a combat sport. But I never, ever saw this kind of anger. There was always, in fact, the opposite; I wrote an op-ed piece a year ago about my relationship with Tom Eagleton—I'm a Republican and he's a Democrat—our relationship when we were colleagues in the Senate, and it was a wonderful, personal relationship, and it rubbed off on our staff in each office. So we were able to have a joint softball team, it was called the Missouri Compromise. I think things have definitely changed in politics, definitely things have changed in Washington, and generally in politics, but I think throughout the country—so, I'm wondering why? Why now? Is there something different? Is there something in the water that is affecting us? What do you think it is?

Chua:

I think there are two factors. I will say that it's how I started; I think America has always been very tribal, but it feels horrible right now, but one reason it's so painful is that a lot of previously silenced voices now have the power to express themselves. It's very unpleasant sometimes, but sometimes things feel like it's not tribal when one tribe is just so overwhelmingly dominant that they don't even know they're a tribe. One of the biggest factors for why things are so painful and toxic right now has to do with the massive demographic changes which this country has been undergoing. Sometimes political correctness doesn't even allow us to talk about this, but if you look at the numbers, we've had massive immigration changes and flows. I said I'm a fan of immigration, and the result is that today, for the first time in American history, whites are on the verge of losing their majority status at the national level. This has already happened in California and Texas and dozens of counties across the country, and so what this means is that for the first time, every group in America is threatened. It used to be that whites weren't threatened; but today it's not just racial minorities, American whites feel threatened. Over 50% of White Americans feel that there is more discrimination against whites than other minorities, and it's not just Republicans. 30% of Democrats feel that there is some or a lot of discrimination against whites. Today, it's not just religious minorities who feel threatened—it's not just Muslims and Jews—Christians feel threatened. You see it in the "war on the Bible," "war on Christianity." With Donald Trump in the White House, women feel threatened; with the Me Too Movement, men feel threatened. Straights, gays, Asians, Latinos—everybody feels threatened. And studies show that it's when people feel threatened that they retreat into tribalism. That's when they become more insular, more defensive, more us versus them. So that's one reason that I think you're seeing a lot of this.

The other big factor has to do with something that—I used to write about developing countries, and I talked about this phenomenon that was very destabilizing for democracies. And for twenty years I said, "We don't have this problem!" This is what I call a market-dominate minority. It's when an ethnic minority that is viewed as an outsider is resented by the poor majority as controlling all the power. So, for example, whites in South Africa; only 9% of the population, and yet they controlled for so many years all the valuable land. The

Chinese; I'm Chinese and from Southeast Asia, and the 3% of Chinese in Indonesia controlled 70% of the private economy in Indonesia. And I always said America never had this problem because for most of our history whites were both economically and politically dominant, and when you have one group that is so dominant it can do all kinds of terrible things, it can oppress, it can enslave, but it can also afford to be more generous. As when, in the 1960s, the WASPs actually voluntarily opened up the Ivy League Schools to Jews and other minorities, they kind of volunteered that. So back to this market-dominant minority idea, I write about how "coastal elites" (and that's kind of a misnomer, I'm also referring probably to people in this room), or urban, cosmopolitan Americans of both sides of the political spectrum. This little group establishment is now regarded by much of President Trump's base and the center of the country, rural America, as a tiny group of people who don't really care about Americans, who wield all the power from afar—they control Hollywood, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, all the universities—and that's not really untrue, but what is untrue is they say, "These people, they care more about the poor in Africa than they do about the poor in this country." So, in the 2016 presidential election, Pres. Trump's rhetoric was very similar to what I have observed in developing countries. In developing countries, there was always a populist leader who could come around and say, "We need to take back our country. The tiny Chinese are controlling everything." So democracy became very destabilizing. Americans tend to romanticize democracy—let's just have elections!—but what happens in these countries is a populist demagogue can whip up large segments of frustrated people and say, "These guys aren't real. We have to get rid of the Chinese, the whites (in South Africa)." Even in this rhetoric of Make America Great Again, we saw Trump say, "We have to take back our country." We see overtones of that. It's not a perfect analogue, because obviously coastal elites are not an ethnicity, and from the point of view of the heartland or rural America, Pres. Obama is the classic coastal elite—he's Ivy League educated, he sounds professorial, he's very cosmopolitan. It's a very insular group; they speak all the same way, they attend the same schools. So that's the second dynamic; education has split America's white population in recent years. You don't see the same upward mobility, and we're starting to get this dynamic that historically was much more common in developing countries.

Danforth:

Two comments on that; first is that I think this is the Trump phenomena. This explains the Trump phenomena, and why he is still popular particularly in rural America or white lower middle class or lower America. Because I think people feel that they have been A) overlooked, that the system is really built to help other minorities, and to take people and move them ahead of these people. And also, there are no programs—there's no affirmative action for the person in Kabool, MO who makes a very modest income, but there is for other people. And I think they feel that everything has left them behind, that they aren't making any progress in life, that the government is helping everyone else in life but not them, and also that they're being disrespected; they're being treated as yokals and rubes and the "deplorables,"

and all of that, and if people are treated that way, they're going to react. So I think that the Trump phenomenon is, even when people think, "Well, we recognize all of his flaws"—I think a lot of people think, "We know he's a bully, but he's our bully. He's our guy. We don't care about policies. We don't care about any of this personal stuff about him. He's our tough guy, and we want a tough guy."

Chua:

And, you know, it's funny, because the tribal instinct is all about identification, and a lot of people are saying, "How can these poor whites not see that he's a millionaire?" But I actually think that in terms of aesthetics and the way he behaves and his style, he does behave much more like his base. We on a college campus will hear one outrageous thing after another and think, "Oh my gosh, this is definitely going to bring him down!" But in fact, people relate to that. They relate to him eating these big whatever taco bowls, and then even when he gets in trouble with the liberal press, for not being feminist enough or not being politically correct enough, for not reading enough books, they actually relate to that. That has happen to them in their own workplace. I think you've captured it very well—that they feel like so many times they don't like what he's saying, but once you connect—it's like a sports team. Sometimes you're really mad at your team or your coach, but the idea that you would then switch to the other side is unthinkable.

Danforth:

I'm never mad at the Blues. The other thought that I had is that it's to the advantage of politicians, it's to the advantage of network news, to make people feel that they've been abused, and to make them feel resentful. For a politician to say to somebody, "You've been used, you've been taken advantage of, you've been treated with disrespect, you've been forgotten, the system is rigged..." This happens from both left and right; it happens from the left for the people who say, "The system is rigged against you," and it happens clearly from the right also, from people who talk about the elites—and then, "Vote for me. Vote for me, because they are against you." And also it builds ratings. So you've got these 24 hour news channels; we don't need 24 hours of news. And by the way, it's not news! It is not news. It's just whipping people into a frenzy left or right depending on what you tune into. I'm not a social media guy; I believe that's true with social media also. But it builds an audience, it builds ratings, and for politicians it builds votes.

So, you talk about a supergroup, where we can have all these tribes, but there also has to be some overarching principle. What is it?

Chua:

I really think it's the principles in our Constitution. I really do; I know it almost sounds banal, and you and I have talked about this; I think we really need to rethink how we are educating our children. Because of these massive demographic changes,

we're in a struggle right now; we're in a process of renegotiating and rediscovering what our national identity is, and we have to find some national identity that will resonate for and be able to bind together rich and poor, urban and rural, immigrants and non-immigrants, the descendents of slaves, and the descendents of slaveowners.

Danforth:

Let me put it a different way: is America exceptional? And should we be proud? You said earlier, of course, there is a big difference between the principles that we advocate and the reality. All men are created equal was written by slaveholders. So, what should make Americans want to belong to a supergroup?

Chua:

To answer your question, I write in the book, yes, I do think America's exceptional. There's a very technical sense in which we were exceptionally racist compared to other countries; we had, alone among other powers, within our boundaries for a long period of time. But I also think we have been exceptional in an incredibly positive way, unifying an incredibly diverse population under a banner of ideas in a non-ethnic or religious way. So here's what I think: I think it's good that we are not whitewashing our history anymore. I think it's important that we tell U.S. history in an honest way. So I'm in favor of the fact that we say, "Look, it's not all that romantic; this is what we did to Native Americans. This is history." But at the same time—and this is what I meant by throwing the baby out with the bathwater—I think it's crucial to teach our children the sense of America being a special nation. By focusing on the flaws of the Constitution and the flaws of the drafters of the Constitution, we can overlook all the astounding successes, and how extraordinary the Constitution was and what it's done. Again, I study the developing world, and most of the countries I've studied have had fifty, sixty, seventy constitutions. And when you compare it to other countries, that's often why immigrants are so grateful to be in this country; because when you come from somewhere else, you see it. I'm often asked when I come to talks like this, "Is there another country that can be our model for helping us get out of political tribalism?" And I always say, I think we're the best model. I mean, this is a horrible moment—

Danforth:

John Beecham has written a very good book called *The Soul of America*. And his point is not to say we're perfect, because obviously—we didn't do away with slavery until 1865, and then after that we had Jim Crow, we've got women not having the vote until 1913, and then we have the whole people being—for sexual orientation—being discriminated against. We have all this stuff, but the aspiration, and the movement, has been to be one country. The aspiration has been to hold ourselves together. And if people are left out of that and feel left out, then the strategy is to bring them in, and to make them part of it. So that is how I feel the overarching

principle: it is simply holding this diverse country together by making everybody a part of it.

Chua:

Right, and there's a lot of work to be done. If you belong to a racial or ethnic group, and your lived experience is that none of the laws work for you, then it's reasonable for you not to buy into the principles of the Constitution. So there's a lot of work we have to do to make all groups feel that there's something worth fighting for. I'm critical of both sides. I often say to my students who are very progressive is that it's easy to say, "America was built on oppression, America was built on white supremacy." And what I always say is there's a huge difference between saying that we have shamefully and repeatedly failed to live up to our own ideals, we have done these terrible things, there's a huge difference between saying that and saying it's all phony. These principles are nothing. Because if we really are just a land of oppression rooted in genocide and white supremacy, then it's hard to see why America would even be worth fighting for. I think there's a lot of work to be done on both sides.

Danforth:

Do we have time for a brief commercial interruption by me on the religious side of things? This is the Center on Religion and Politics. I think that it is the obligation of what we call the faith community, and in particular congregations, to be instruments of trying to hold the country together. The word religion comes from the same root as the word ligament; it's to bind things together. Religion has had the opposite effect, obviously, historically, but that's the meaning of the word, and it should really be something that faithful people focus on. In our church and in I'm sure others we exchange the peace. That is, we turn to people who may be total strangers, we extend our hand, and we say, *The Peace of the Lord*. Now, I think we should exchange the peace with everybody; not just people in our walls. We wouldn't say the peace of the Lord, but we could say, I am your friend. Think of the cultural change that would bring about. It's something that faithful people can do.

And one final comment—politics, we get all wrought up about it, mad about it. The other guy's the enemy and somebody we have to destroy. But it's only politics. That's all it is. Paul Tillich, the great Protestant theologian of the last century, talked about religion being a matter of ultimate concern. There can't be two or three ultimate concerns, and it surely isn't politics. It can't be. I told this story before, but back in 1982, I thought I was going to lose my re-election to the Senate. And I almost did, I saved it at the end, but I almost lost, and I'm clearly upset. Terribly. My whole life was going to end, because my political career was going to be over. And my then 15-year-old daughter Dede, whose son is here, tried to buck me up. And she said to me, "Well, it's not the World Series!" And it's surely not religion.

Dean Nancy Staudt:

Thank you for a fantastic fireside chat, Senator, and Prof. Chua. The first question is, “In your book, you often describe tribalism as natural or primal, psychological or even instinctual. How, then, does your theory relate to history? Is your theory intentionally ahistorical in some way? Are tribal people somehow outside of history?”

Chua:

Interesting. So, there are a bunch of studies that are the optimistic ones near the end of the book that yes, humans are tribal, it's a natural instinct, in all of human society there really are no societies where people don't live in groups. Hermits are extremely rare. But a large body of interdisciplinary studies also show that if you can just pull people out of their tribes—I think this is related to Senator Danforth's inspiring call—and get them to interact really as human beings, they still feel tribal, but they can really connect. And the best example of this that I give is actually the integration of the military in the 1950s. So, when they called for integration; the whole country was against it. The troops were against it, the leadership, the people, but after they did this, they did a bunch of studies, and they found first of all that the integrated troops were as or more effective than the all-white troops. And then they conducted a bunch of interviews, and they found that—and this was a time that Italian-Americans had never met Swedish Americans who had never met Mexican-Americans—it wasn't all race. And it's a beautiful collection of statements. People said, “When you're alone in a foxhole or a bunker, and you're afraid you're going to die and you miss home, you don't really care what kind of accent the person next to you has. If your life is in danger, you don't care what color of skin the color next to you is.” There were a lot terrible things about the Vietnam War, but one positive thinking was that people of different religions, ethnicities, actually saw each other as individuals. Even with same-sex marriage, about 15 years ago, only 11% of the American population approved of same-sex marriage. Now it's up to 63%. Why? People started learning that it was their children, their neighbors, their friends; people they knew as human beings. Not just faceless, easy-to-demonize people. So that changed public opinion really quickly. So in regards to the question, I certainly don't think I'm trying to be ahistorical; there are plenty of examples of great leaders. Nelson Mandela is a great example. Everybody predicted that this was going to be a time when tribalism would take the country apart. Finally this incredibly subjugated population now takes power, and that didn't happen. Mandela was a very inclusive, almost superhuman person. So I don't think I'm being ahistorical, I just think that you have to search for those examples, and right now it's easier to focus on the negatives.

Staudt:

Could you talk a little more about your idea that the Constitution is our hope? As you point out, students have long noted that the founding era privileged the white, propertied man, and it took a war to open the Constitution to racial equality, it took

many more decades to open the Constitution to gender equality, and even then, what people say is that it was custom and statutes that proved to create equality across the country. Is it possible that it's not the formal Constitution, but rather the American psyche—we are always trying to do better?

Chua:

I feel like that's almost more romantic. I'd like to think about it, it's an interesting question. The way I see it, America is an aspirational country. We always have been. Our reality has always exceeded our ideals. I end the book with a poem by Langston Hughes that is very beautiful; he says all of this, that the Constitution didn't apply to anybody—not the Native Americans not... And he said, "Let America be America; we're all looking for that day." I don't know if people have seen Hamilton, but what's interesting about it is that it's incredibly patriotic, actually; it deliberately takes groups that have been excluded for the whole history of America and puts them center stage, so it's jarring in that way, but if you read it, it's a play that really values the constitution and sees it as—we imagine the day when those ideals really can apply to everyone equally. So I'll think about it.

Danforth:

Another angle on the Constitution—most people when they think about the Constitution think about individual rights. They think about the Bill of Rights. But it's important to think about the structure of the Constitution and the way it was written. And it was written consciously—this is Madison—in order to hold together different interests. The interests today are more and more complex than they were then, but that was the structure of the Constitution. In Article I, which is the Congress, was the part of the Constitution written to hold these groups together. So everybody with a point of view or an interest could come to one place, share their point of view, hopefully reach some sort of compromise and work things out. What is lost today is Article I of the Constitution; what is lost today is the Congress. Congress is feckless today; it does not do its job, and there are reasons for that; where I served, the US Senate, is particularly feckless. One of the goals we should have is to restore Congress as the policy-making branch of the government.

Staudt:

I go to high school in a town that is very liberal. Tribalism is very real at my school. I feel that my teachers are often weighing in with their own perspective and stances. How can we possibly pull away from this fractured system if every day we are taught to dislike the other side at our school?

Chua:

That's a great question. So much wisdom. I think that one of the biggest problems is that we just can't talk to each other anymore. I was saying that I'm a big fan of

immigration, but I feel like somebody should be allowed to say, “These big demographic changes are making me anxious, and I don’t know, is this good, should there be a limit, what should the rules be?” We should be able to have that kind of a conversation. People should be able to express their concerns about, say, terrorism. But right now we’ve gotten to the point, certainly on campuses, where you can’t even use certain words. If you express a tiny bit of anxiety about immigration, you’re instantly a xenophobe, or an Islamophobe. I think this is terrible. It’s a little bit related. I think it relates some to what the Senator said about Congress; I still do believe in great leaders. And it can be teachers in that sense to set the example. Sometimes I think that in our system we don’t reward bravery anymore. There’s tribalism—if someone’s being called out for being terrible, but if you as a young high schooler want to stand up and defend someone you don’t even agree with, you’ll be called out more, cancelled. So I think it has to come from inspiring leaders. Another thing is, I think people are just starting to be exhausted. You just hear the most shrill voices, it’s everywhere—but when I talk to people, when I meet people, I just feel like more and more Americans are so tired of this and actually do want to reach out to the other side and move away from this. But I couldn’t even begin to answer that question. We have a lot of work to do.

Staudt:

What can ordinary and diverse citizens do to combat tribalism and polarization in public forums?

Chua:

In public forums...well, let me start with one thing on the optimistic note. When I started giving talks around the country, I started hearing about all of these organizations that I had never heard of trying to bridge the divide. That was incredibly uplifting for me. I don’t know if this counts as a public forum, but one of my favorites is “Make America Dinner Again.” There were these two college kids from the Bay Area; after the Trump election, they were devastated. They couldn’t get out of bed for a week, thinking of leaving the country—and then they realized they had never actually spoken or met a Trump supporter. So they started this program having dinner parties, initially in the Bay Area, where you would bring people from different sides of the political spectrum, and they’ve now spread to lots of different places. Something that I have been very excited about as one way—maybe this counts as a public thing—to bridge, I mentioned that there are many different tribal divides undercutting this country right now. One of them is the one I mentioned between rural, working-class—essentially President Trump’s base—and coastal elites, urban cosmopolitan groups. The mutual distain and stereotyping between these two groups is so intense that it’s almost an ethnic difference. There is so little marriage and interaction between these two groups. It is more common or a Caucasian person to attend Columbia University to marry someone from Nigeria or India or Jamaica or India at Columbia than it would be to marry someone from Appalachia. So one idea I had was some kind of a national service program. The

draft served this purpose for so many years. It brought people rich and poor, of different backgrounds, together. We don't have that now, but what we do have is a lot of kids after high school, especially privileged kids, spend a gap year; usually it's in Australia or Ecuador or Amsterdam. Often they go with their own friends, so it's still the same bubble. They do wonderful things. But what if we had a program, whether voluntary or mandatory, where children from the Coasts, from California, from more elite backgrounds, were encouraged to go to another part of America where they would never set foot, and work with young kids of their same age working towards a common project. Not in a condescending way, like "let me teach you something," but working side by side. The reason I brought this up is I feel like this idea is something that's getting traction simultaneously in all different circles. I remember thinking of it, and then totally coincidentally Tim Wu, who writes in the New York Times, sent me an email proposing the same thing. I think at Brookings they've been talking about it, and I believe Mayor Pete mentioned it—so that might be a way to start early enough to talk to each other, before—because when you encounter people already in your political tribes, it's very hard to break down.

Staudt:

Make America Dinner Again—I like that. I've heard people say Make America Great Britain Again, but you say Great Britain failed, so. Maybe that can be a call to action for all of us; bring people home and have conversations.

In your book, you refer to our age of political correctness. This seems perhaps dismissive of very important critical interventions by feminists, anti-racists, and others who are seeking greater social justice for the oppressed. Why reject such efforts out of hand?

Chua:

Actually, I don't. I really don't even like the term "political correctness," because I think there's a whole arsenal of words on both sides of the political spectrum that are just weaponized. Racist, political correctness—these terms lose their meaning. I actually agree with the questioner; I think that there have been incredibly important interventions. I think it's great that people don't use certain terms or say certain things or assume—I'm generally very sympathetic to that. Where I disagree is where it almost seems like what the Senator is saying, where it becomes like a gotchya game, where you're just waiting. Wait for someone to trip up. And there is a class dimension to this; I've noticed with my students who come from not-so-wealthy families. The vocabulary of what we have to say on college campuses, it changes so quickly—Latinx, we're constantly being trained. If you're somebody from a different background, not so wealthy, not from that educational background—how can you know the right vocabulary? So when you have a lack of generosity, and when it's not even really about improving things and trying to make a better forum, but rather just this gotchya—I think that's what I think is not productive.

Staudt: Would you consider countries like the United Kingdom with strong sub-identities (including the Scots and the Northern Irish) a supergroup?

Chua: No, I don't. It's actually interesting, because the U.K. seems a lot like us, but the United Kingdom's overarching national identity (which would have to be "British") is actually very weak right now, because there's very strong subgroup identity—like Scottish or Irish, and that's why you see all these succession movements and referendums. A lot of multiculturalism. The reason that they don't have a very strong overarching national identity is twofold. First, Britishness is very much associated with Englishness, because it's the largest portion of the population—I think it's 80%--and that naturally doesn't sit so well with very strong Scottish nationalism or Irish nationalism. And the second reason that it's hard to come up with a vibrant overall national identity is that Empire is absolutely anathema in polite circles, so if you were to have this British identity, so much of it is wrapped up with this long history of the British Empire, and that's something that's very uncomfortable. When I go there, the politicians talk about this—that there's a lot of multiculturalism, even with Brexit, but the overarching glue to hold the whole UK together is something people worry about.

Staudt:

There's a series of questions in this genre, so I'll try to put this together. White Americans undeniably have had a legacy of privilege and power. Could Americans be healed faster if White Americans owned up to their role in promoting exclusion, or what specifically can White Americans do to promote inclusion in a national identity?

Chua:

When I said that we're all renegotiating our history right now, I do think that it is important to deromanticize our history, to acknowledge that we talk in these amazing terms, even the Constitution's principles that, for much of our history, those values and rights were not extended to entire groups. Myself, I think it's very dangerous to—I'm not a huge fan of the "check your privilege." It goes back to human nature. I think it's human nature to want to belong to a group that you feel proud of, that you want to defend, and I think it can only last so long to be—"You're from a terrible group, an oppressive group, the worst group on earth, you should just go underground." Because what happens is that those people will start to be very, very susceptible to very lethal populists. They will go underground. They will go to darker circles where people are saying, "You know, white people aren't so bad. Look at all the things white people have invented. In fact, you know who's really bad..." I find it very dangerous, that perspective. I've studied ethno-nationalism for so long, and I just don't like anything in the direction of calling out an entire group based on their skin color or blood, whether it's black or white. So I do feel there should be some ownership of the fact that our history—I don't think our history should be whitewashed. But I'm not sure even strategically for bringing people

together and maximizing more rights and more justice that that's the way to go. I think partly that that's why we see those toxic white nationalist groups, why we see these horrific supremacist groups that are gaining traction. I think it's the combination of whites feeling that they are losing power and easily being drawn into these crazy people saying, "There's white genocide going on." They start to feel like they're in a war, and you see the violence coming out. So in general, I think it's a dangerous way to talk about a whole people. I don't think it's psychologically sound.

Danforth:

You mention in your book people who say, "I am tired of being called a racist."

Chua:

Yeah, I even see this at Yale Law School. Progressive young men who are just exhausted. And I do see them go underground, I see smaller groups talking amongst themselves freely, and that's where it's more dangerous, because there's no one to check them. If they're going to be called out right and left publicly, then they aren't going to talk to those people, and it's going to go into their own echo chamber and things just get more dangerous, I think.

Staudt:

Okay, we have time for one more question. This is a question that is also showing up in a series of the cards. It relates to what you've talked about in the past in your written work, the concept of "free market democracy." You've specifically argued that exporting free market democracy can create ethnic hatred and undermine peace. And yet some people see America as becoming great through the Constitution and a commitment to free market democracy. Do you think maybe that one reason we've turned to tribalism is because of our decline in world dominance and economic status?

Chua:

These are such great questions, there are at least ten difference questions imbedded in that. For sure, economic insecurity is one demonstrated factor in the rise of tribalism. For sure, there is much less social mobility and upward mobility in America right now. It used to be that education was the great equalizer, that you could go to a state school or not-too-expensive school and do pretty well and then move to a coast...at this point, a lot of those traditional avenues of rising have been cut off, for reasons that a colleague of mine has just written a book about: Daniel Merkovitz, *The Meritocracy Trap*. How education is so expensive now, with the tutors. You can't even live in Silicon Valley or New York City now, it's so expensive. So the rigidification of class is something that I think definitely contributes to tribalism. How exactly that relates to free market democracy, it touches a couple of books related to this. So I might have to table that one.

Griffith:

Unfortunately, it's time to bring our evening to a close. I have just a few short remarks to make. But first, let's thank our participants Amy and Jack for this great talk. [Applause] Very briefly, before I let you go, I want to remind you that you're all warmly welcomed now to a reception and book signing in Umrath Lounge, which is just a short walk from here. We have lots of food and drink already out, and copies of Prof. Chua's book, *Political Tribes*, will be on sale, and she'll be glad to sign a copy for you. Please join us as well for other events at the Center on Religion and Politics this semester; our next event, Eddie Glaude, who is Princeton University's James S. McDonald Distinguished University Professor, will be speaking on Oct. 24 about James Baldwin and the moral crisis of American democracy. Then lawyer and religious freedom expert Asma Uddin will speak on Oct. 28 on Islam and America's fight for religious freedom. This event was organized by Prof. John Inazu and will include a panel discussion with Profs. Tazeen Ali and Laurie Maffly-Kipp as well as Prof. Inazu. Thanks so much to Nancy Staudt and the Law School for this great collaboration tonight with the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, and please join me once again in thanking our distinguished guest speakers.

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