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**Virginia Tech Institute for Policy & Governance****Quarterly Newsletter****April 2018, Volume VII, Issue II**

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**From the Director: Tidings Quarterly Reflection:  
The Dangers of “Cotton Candy” Politics**

**Max Stephenson**  
**Director, Virginia Tech Institute**  
**For Policy & Governance**

Regular readers of this column know that I usually employ it to reflect on Institute for Policy and Governance (IPG) projects and seek to explore and illuminate the broader questions or concerns those efforts embody. I want to depart temporarily from that precedent to comment on the fundamental importance of civic capacity for deliberation for self-governance, a concern that underpins all of IPG’s work. Indeed, recent years have witnessed something of a renaissance on the topic via a wide-ranging literature -how such deliberation might be defined, what processes might conduce to it, how to equip individuals with capacities to practice it and so on. This literature is doubtless a rich one, and it owes much to many scholars. Yet, at bottom, these authors have examined an apparently simple question: how human beings can come to live peaceably and reasonably in freedom with one another while addressing the inevitable conflicts among their number that will arise.

My sense is deliberation has become so signal a question once more because interested scholars are well aware that in the United States (U.S.) and many other nations, a large and growing share of

citizens exhibit less informed awareness of political questions, even as such issues have become more enmeshed in their personal daily lives. To some extent, the internet and social media, as well as the canalization of communications media more generally, have allowed a share of citizens to turn inward and worry more about reporting their reaction to their breakfast cereal to their friends than on, say, a genocide occurring in another nation or another mass shooting in their own. They can, and many also seek, news and information that conforms to their personal world view or affirms their opinions and expectations.

These individuals have become self-absorbed masters of their own wants and preferences and constant purveyors of the same, while increasingly less conscious of community occurrences, and still less capable of imagining what they owe the broader body politic. Indeed, they believe it owes them, and they demand that it serve their personal desires more efficiently and effectively. I have overstated and exaggerated this point for emphasis, as there are many citizens who use social media and the internet to discuss

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## Acknowledgements & Accomplishments

Warm congratulations to **Hamza Safouane** who successfully defended his dissertation on February 7, 2018 to complete requirements for the PhD in Planning, Governance and Globalization! Congratulations too to his advisory committee, which included the following faculty members: Tim Luke, Political Science/GIA, Chair, Joyce Rothschild (Emerita), GIA, Brett Shadle, History and Max Stephenson, SPIA/UAP and Director of Institute for Policy and Governance. Hamza's effort was entitled, "Governing Migrants in the European Union: A Critical Approach to Interrogating Migrants' Journey Narratives."

IPG affiliated students **Beth Olberding** (MURP.MNR candidate), **Neda Moayerian** (PhD PGG candidate) and **Laura Nagle** (MURP) won first and second prizes respectively at the CAUS

Graduate Student Research Poster competition held March 19, 2018. Kudos to all!

Thomas Murray, a third-year MFA candidate in Public Directing and Dialogue has created a documentary play, *The Right of Way*, about the death of a bicyclist in Chicago. He developed the drama on the basis of interviews with the bicyclist's family and friends, court transcripts, and contextual interviews with civil engineers, urban planners, lawyers, and historians. Former MURP students Tara Reel and Michael Stapor are both referenced in the play. *The Right of Way* had a full production in the Cube at the Moss Arts Center, March 29-31. In addition, Murray's work was selected for discussion at the Sackler Student Symposium at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. He will also be co-

## Acknowledgements & Accomplishments

presenting at the national conference for the American Planning Association with Michael Stapor in April. The two will offer an educational session entitled [Docudrama for Catalyzing Complete Streets Conversation](#) that will reflect on *The Right of Way's* connection with non-arts partners. Congratulations to Thomas!

Dr. Max Stephenson has been selected as the winner of the CAUS 2018 Outstanding Mentor Award. This award was created by the Graduate School to recognize one faculty member from each college for their role in supporting, encouraging, and promoting a positive and inclusive scholarly and teaching environment, and for contributing to the professional and personal development of graduate students. Thank you Dr. Stephenson for your strong commitment to facilitating graduate student learning and modeling outstanding mentoring. Congratulations!

Congratulations to **Dr. Priscila Izar**! Dr. Izar successfully defended her dissertation entitled “Housing Provision through Real Estate Development:

*Adopting Public-Private Partnerships for Affordable Housing Delivery in Brazil”*. Izar’s committee members included Maggie Cowell (UAP/SPIA), Mariana Fix (Instituto de Economia, University of Campina, Brazil, Derek Hyra (School of Public Affairs, American University) and committee co-chairs, David Bierrri (UAP and Real Estate Faculty Fellow) and Giselle Datz (GIA Associate Professor).

Nada Berrada, PhD student in ASPECT, is serving as a Diversity Scholar. Diversity Scholars are graduate students whose goal is to create dialogue, provide advocacy, and implement change for a more diverse and inclusive experience for all graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators. She was chosen to join the inaugural International Student Advisory Board (ISAB) at Virginia Tech. The (ISAB) represents the needs and concerns of the international student community at Virginia Tech by providing a forum for international students to give feedback on initiatives, programs, policies, and services that impact international students.

## News and Events

Anne Khademian, director of SPIA for the past 7 years, stepped down to accept an assignment as a presidential fellow in the Office of the President at Virginia Tech. Joel Peters will be the Interim Director and Yang Zhang will be Interim Associate Director. We at IPG would like to wish Anne well in her new endeavor and welcome Joel as Interim Director.

The College of Architecture and Urban Studies Spring Awards Ceremony will be held Thursday, April 19, 5:00—7:00pm at the German Club of Virginia Tech.

The School of Public and International Affairs Spring Awards Ceremony will be held April 16, 3:00—4:30pm at the Graduate Life Center Multipurpose Room.

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Abigail Noelle White was born on Feb 21. She is the daughter of Danny and Meredith White. Abigail measured 21  $\frac{3}{4}$ " and 8lbs 12oz. She has two sisters, Addison and Amelia, and one brother, William. Danny is a doctoral PGG student working with Max Stephenson, who is his committee chair.



## News and Events (continued)

### IPG holds *RE: Reflections and Explorations* book Reception

On March 14th IPG held a reception at the Newman Library celebrating the publication of the second volume in the book series entitled: *RE: Reflections and Explorations: A Forum for Deliberative Dialogue* edited by VTIPG Director **Max Stephenson Jr.** and affiliated research faculty member **Lyusyena Kirakosyan**. Thank you for your interest in this series and text! The new book can be found on the VT Publishing website: <https://publishing.vt.edu/site/books/10.21061/vtipg.re.v2/>. It can also be found in VT institutional repository VTech Works: <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/81094>.



Dr. Max Stephenson, Director of IPG, doing the honors of cutting the celebratory cake.



Authors/fellow graduate student: Amiel Bernal, Jake Keyel, Nada Berrada, Kannikha Kolandaivelu, and Neda Moayerian



Comments were made by Dean Blythe and SPIA Interim Director Joel Peters



Reception attendees.

# IPG Project Updates

## Strategically Positioning Montgomery, WV for the Future: Follow-Up Workshop with Stakeholder Working Group

On Friday, March 16, a team of representatives from the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance (IPG) and the VT Office of Economic Development (OED) met with a stakeholder working group from Montgomery, WV on the VT Blacksburg campus for a day-long workshop focused on community development. Since August 2017, the VT team and the Montgomery working group have discussed the town's strengths and challenges in the context of strategically positioning the community for change and future growth. As noted in previous IPG newsletters, a cascade of additional issues has accompanied the decline of Montgomery's coal industry, including a shrinking tax base, relocation of a major institution in higher education long located in the town, planned closure of the local high school, pressure to maintain existing infrastructure with limited funding, and associated social impacts, such as increases in opioid abuse and loss of active community and civic groups. Yet, the town's stakeholder working group has announced several exciting advancements for Montgomery, including grant awards for improved streetscapes, transportation enhancements, and demolition of blighted buildings with little historical value.

BridgeValley Community and Technical College, an institution in Montgomery offering post-secondary professional certificates and associate degrees, is a primary champion to support the town's stabilization. BridgeValley will soon host a training facility in woodworking, welding, brewing, and other technical trades open to community members. The institution is also launching an early/middle college credit program for local high school students, personally connecting hundreds of local students and their families to a vital community resource in higher education. Nonetheless, the working group acknowledges the need to establish a larger team of business, industry, civic, non-profit, health, and other educational partners to realize Montgomery's goals and vision for community change. How can the town leverage its entrepreneurial, financial, and social capital to address its needs?

In response to this ongoing challenge, the workshop featured a panel of professionals working in community development who shared their experience in private business and entrepreneurship, nonprofit consulting and engagement, and municipal planning:

[Annette Patterson](#) with the Advancement Foundation (Vinton, VA), which provides strategic planning, fundraising, and board development guidance to community non-profits;

[James Creekmore](#), founder of Creekmore Law Firm, LLC and [Studio 2.0](#) (Blacksburg, VA), advancing local business interests through legal support, networking, and logistical opportunities;

Lydeana Martin, Community and Economic Development Director for Floyd County and representative of the [Floyd Innovation Center](#);

[Anthony Flaccavento](#), a private consultant in sustainable economic development who is running a second time for Congress in Virginia's 9<sup>th</sup> District.

Patterson recommended "beta testing" pilot projects, to learn from and build on the visioning process, rather than stagnate in the brainstorming phase. In response to frustrated entrepreneurs in Vinton, VA, Patterson worked with a network of business mentors and real estate agents to connect local entrepre-

## IPG Project Updates - (continued)

neurs with the knowledge and resources they needed. To grow the network, the Foundation established the [Gauntlet business challenge](#) with cash prizes. What started four years ago as a small business incubator and a local business challenge among 15 entrepreneurs with \$15,000 in cash prizes has now grown into a network of 115 entrepreneurs competing for \$250,000 in cash prizes, Virginia's largest business competition, according to Patterson.

Martin noted similarly that prize money, grants, and loans are part of an "economic gardening" effort to initiate members into a program, and once connected, they realize its many other benefits. The Floyd Innovation Center has been an instrumental business incubator and physical space for monthly community development meetings in a non-threatening environment. Martin described the success of the "[Floyd Grown](#)" project connecting agricultural and local food businesses, now with 85 participating members, some of whom distribute their products as far away as Philadelphia and other regional markets. Rural vendors likewise benefit from an internet connection and instruction in online marketing, to expand their customer base. Through these initiatives, 25 full-time equivalent jobs have been created in the county, and entrepreneurs benefit from a growing network of resources.



Panelists Annette Patterson, Lydeana Martin, and James Creekmore and Anthony Flaccavento

Creekmore, a self-described "professional dabbler," nonetheless has an established career in intellectual property law and business litigation. Both his law firm and Studio 2.0, Creekmore's business incubator/co-working space in Blacksburg, support local businesses with legal expertise, affordable office space, and access to educational programs in finance and other business management topics. Creekmore discussed the need for a more cohesive business vision between Blacksburg and Virginia Tech, where small local businesses and entrepreneurs need to have an incentive to provide a broader array of services than merely supplying the remaining "vices" that Tech does not provide (e.g. tattoo parlors, bars, vape shops, etc.). Creekmore described his efforts to combine arts studios and galleries with other businesses to create a mixed-use synergy. However, he noted that license and property taxes as well as traditional zoning can be a challenge for small, local businesses.

Flaccavento, author of "Building a Healthy Economy from the Bottom Up" with a foreword by Bill McKib-

## IPG Project Updates - (continued)

ben, works as a consultant in sustainable economic development and is running for Congress in Virginia's 9<sup>th</sup> District. During the panel, Flaccavento described case studies in Abingdon, VA of local incubators such as [White Birch Juice Company](#), [Blue Door Garden](#), and [Wolf Farm Elements](#), which source local and regional materials to serve fresh juices and food, create stunning floral displays for events and weddings, and supply natural and organic farm supplies at a reasonable cost, respectively. Flaccavento suggested that local business clusters and creative marketing can help to foster economic growth: for instance, an agricultural cluster that includes micro dairies, milk and meat co-operatives and herd shares, medical professionals writing "farmacy" prescriptions for fresh foods, and farm to table restaurants and breweries in historic buildings, such as the [Western Front Hotel](#) in St. Paul, VA.

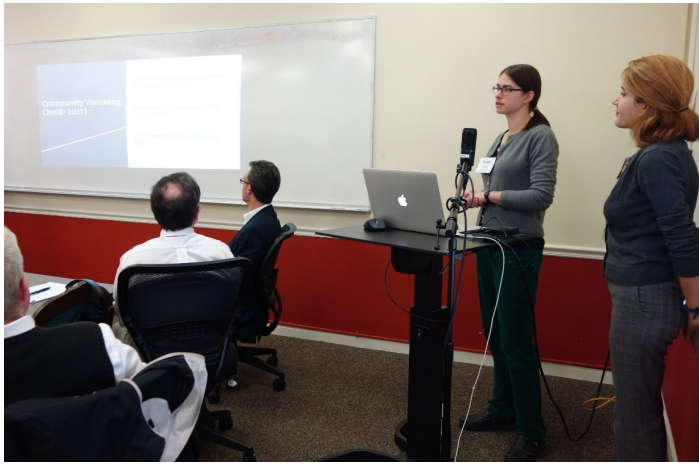


Representatives from the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance (IPG) and the VT Office of Economic Development (OED) met with a stakeholder working group from Montgomery, WV on the VT Blacksburg campus for a day-long workshop focused on community development.

The panelists encouraged the Montgomery working group to shadow other successful programs, take field trips to case study towns, host additional panels focused on topics of interest, and adapt projects for beta testing in their community. Longitudinal surveys, tracking progress, and compiling data to observe trends are important feedback mechanisms to apply for future grants and improve pilot projects. For instance, how many self-employed people work in Montgomery and has this number changed over time? Would a business incubator provide vital resources to these local entrepreneurs? Which resources have been most useful? Which ones could be improved?

After a fruitful brainstorming session with the Montgomery stakeholder working group to further its conversation concerning next steps, the workshop concluded with a presentation by Andrew Morikawa, IPG Senior Fellow, who provided a framework for effective team building and collaboration. Citing an extensive [Google research study](#), Morikawa explained that effective teams most often share two traits: each member spends roughly equal time speaking, and all participants feel comfortable sharing feelings without fear of rejection, criticism, or denial. Other techniques, such as clarifying group norms, can build legitimacy and trust, while social events outside of formal meetings often improve group dynamics. Reflexive practices such as bullet journaling and applying the "30-30" technique at monthly meetings, to reflect on the past month and determine action steps for the next, can help Montgomery's working group better engage with team projects and facilitate community-centered discussions in the future.





Lara Nagle and Neda Moayerian of the VT Institute for Policy and Governance present a community development update for workshop panelists and the Montgomery stakeholder group

Round table introductions with Montgomery's working group members, Albert Alwang and Sarah Lyon-Hill of the VT Office of Economic Development



## Conference & Print Representation

**Neda Moayerian** was competitively awarded a scholarship by the Appalachian Studies Association to attend its conference which will be held at the Millennium Hotel, April 5-8, in Cincinnati, Ohio. She will present an article co-authored with Max Stephenson. The article title is "Exploring the Connections between Community Cultural Development and Sustainable Tourism in Appalachia".

**Lyusyena Kirakosyan** will be presenting on the narrative identities of the Brazilian female Paralympians at the 76th Annual Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA). The conference will be held in Chicago on April 5-8. She also received a Developing Nations scholarship from the MPSA in the form of a complimentary membership.

Lyusyena Kirakosyan has been accepted to present at the 2018 Annual Conference of the Cana-

dian Disability Studies Association in the May 27-29, 2018. The conference is a part of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. She will be presenting "The Feminist Perspectives on the Identities of Brazil's Paralympic Athletes".

**Nada Berrada** will be presenting her paper, "Surveying the Arab Youth Survey" in the 2018 Virginia Social Science Association (VSSA) Conference to be held on Saturday, April 21, 2018 in Richmond, Virginia.

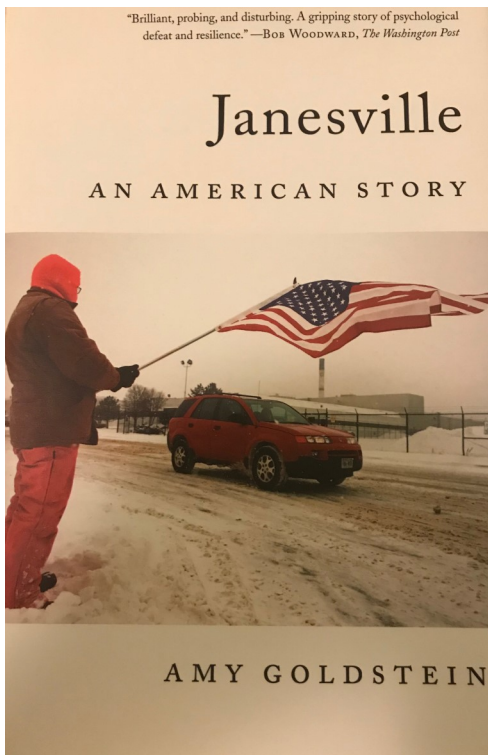


# COMMUNITY VOICES

ideas for change • ideas that matter

**Amy Goldstein, staff writer for *The Washington Post* on Virginia Tech Campus**

Community Voices kicked off its Spring Series with Amy Goldstein, author of "Janesville: An American Story." Goldstein participated in a lunch-time interactive roundtable discussion, held an interview from students and later that evening, she presented, "Reflections on Janesville: An American Story," where she discussed her book and the lessons it offers about economic pain and community resilience.



Amy Goldstein (center) pictured with podcast interviewers Neda Moayerian (PGG) (left) and Vanessa Guerra M (PGG) and Mary Ryan (right)

The book explores what happens to workers, families, businesses, schools, and a proud community when the leading employers and the good industrial jobs they provide disappear. She spent years getting to know Janesville, Wisconsin, where the nation's oldest operating General Motors plant shut down in 2008 in the midst of the Great Recession.

Goldstein has been a staff writer at *The Washington Post* for 30 years. She currently covers health care policy, focusing on the Affordable Care Act and the Trump administration's approach to the U.S. health care system. She was one of a team of *Washington Post* reporters awarded the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting for the newspaper's coverage of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the



government's response to them. She was also a 2009 Pulitzer Prize finalist for national reporting for an investigative series she co-wrote on the medical treatment of immigrants detained by the federal government.

**Sponsored by:** Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, School of Public and International Affairs, Outreach and International Affairs, Graduate School, Department of Political Science, Institute for Policy and Governance, Insti-

tute for Society Culture and Environment, College of Architecture and Urban Studies, and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

## **Keryl McCord, policy consultant and social justice activist at Virginia Tech**

Keryl McCord used her Community Voices roundtable on February 15, 2018 at the Graduate Life Center to reflect on the focal points of her professional life and to contend that she has been able to address those challenges by learning not to fear what is going to happen next.

During the interview a student asked her to share her perceptions of community-based theater and she responded that "every theater is community-based," since all stories ultimately are born of, and draw on, human social experience. McCord also argued that all organizations can become more inclusive and diverse by promoting empathy and mutual understanding of shared values. She illustrated this view with many examples in which her work in cultural-based organizations has led to increased social awareness and justice among those participating. She also highlighted several artists who had shaped her professional life, but more importantly in her view, had spurred social change through their art-making. McCord's dedication to diversity and inclusion of all voices in her work as an artist and nonprofit leader was awe-inspiring. Her visit was a reminder that discrimination and prejudice are persistent forces in human society, and that the arts can play a significant role in creating space and agential possibilities for countering their malignant power.—by Neda Moayerian and Sarah Lyon-Hill



**Sponsored by:** Keryl McCord's visit to campus was sponsored by the School of Performing Arts Colloquium Series. She spoke at a round table arranged by the Institute for Policy and Governance Community Voices graduate student group.

Keryl McCord interviewed by Neda Moayerian (PGG) and Sarah Lyon-Hill (PGG)

## Faculty Spotlight: Maggie Cowell

Dr. Margaret (Maggie) Cowell is an Associate Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Virginia Tech. She joined VT in 2010 and teaches courses on economic development, urban economics and public policy. Dr. Cowell previously worked as an Assistant Regional Economist for the Buffalo Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. She has also served as a member of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation-funded research project, “[Building Resilient Regions](#)” and as part of a team of researchers assessing southwest Virginia’s entrepreneurial ecosystem for the Kauffman Foundation. She is currently a co-principal investigator for a National Science Foundation Research Traineeship (NRT) program on Disaster Resilience and Risk Management. Dr. Cowell’s research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Kauffman Foundation, National Association of Counties and the United States Economic Development Administration.



Much of Maggie’s scholarship focuses on regional resilience and economic development. She is the author of [Dealing with Deindustrialization: Adaptive Resilience in American Midwestern Regions](#) (Routledge 2014), which employed key stakeholder interviews to examine industrial Midwestern metropolitan regions as they grappled with deindustrialization in the 1980s. Using adaptive resilience as a lens, the book explored how the unique attributes of eight metropolitan regions – asset bases, modes of governance, civic capacity, leadership qualities and external factors – influenced the responses to changed economic circumstances adopted by civic leaders and the outcomes those strategies achieved at the regional scale. Maggie has also published numerous peer-reviewed articles focused on economic resilience, restructuring and development.

Dr. Cowell teaches applied research courses on economic development and change. During Spring 2018, Dr. Cowell is pleased to be teaching two applied research studios. The first – SPIA 4984: Small Cities, Resilience, and Global Change – is co-taught with Dr. Jon Bohland of Hollins University (HU) in Roanoke, Virginia. Drs. Bohland and Cowell lead undergraduates at VT and HU in a cross-campus studio that focuses on the unique needs and opportunities of smaller cities, interrogating the idea of “Place marketing, Creative Class Recruitment and Narratives of Regeneration” to understand the process of economic transition and redevelopment in Roanoke, VA. The second – [UAP 5774: The Economic Development Studio @ VT](#) – is co-taught with Drs. John Provo and Scott Tate of Virginia Tech’s Office of Economic Development. Graduate students in Blacksburg and Alexandria are exploring and documenting the dynamics, opportunities and challenges for talent retention and attraction along Virginia’s I-81 corridor.

Dr. Cowell obtained her PhD in City and Regional Planning from Cornell University, Master of Urban Planning from SUNY Buffalo, and B.A. in Urban Studies from Brown University. She lives in Baltimore with her husband and two young sons.

## Student Spotlight: Lara Nagle



Lara Nagle is a first-year master's student in the Urban and Regional Planning program in Blacksburg and a graduate assistant for the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance (IPG). Her IPG position has involved her in a number of exciting projects, such as visioning for community development in Appalachian towns, investigating participatory governance strategies in Latin America and conducting survey analysis for the Virginia Public Sector Leader (VPSL) curricula.

Lara's research and professional interests include environmental conservation and land use planning. Her thesis will consider

alternative valuation methods for the land conservation easement process, including exploration of the relationship between payment for ecosystem services (PES) mechanisms and the current appraisal process. She earned a B.A. from Oberlin College in Environmental Studies ('09) and an M.S. from Penn State in Landscape Architecture ('16).

While at Penn State, Lara completed a thesis studying the productivity of an outdoor green wall growing fresh produce in an urban context. She was lucky to work alongside faculty with research and professional expertise in ecology, forestry, sustainable agriculture, horticulture, urban design, recreation, parks and tourism management, planning, and community engagement. This experience informed Lara's decision to enroll at Virginia Tech, where the breadth of courses and research projects effectively complement and enhance her understanding of the collaborative systems approach needed to sustain natural and human resources.

## Max Stephenson's Tidings (continued)

and to learn more about current events and governance. But my point here is widely known and is as broadly a topic of concern.

U.S. elementary and secondary schools have contributed to this situation, as they have not adequately acquainted their students with how American democratic politics works, or their roles in its success, for some decades. In 2017, for example, only 24 percent of U.S. high school seniors who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics examination scored at a level high enough to be deemed “proficient” in their understanding of core ideas related to the American regime and its Constitution. This educational trend is partly the product of political and social choices that have sought to prize markets as the arbiter of all things and to ensure that students are “job ready,” rather than also to make certain they become informed and deliberative citizens. Relatedly, this result is surely the consequence of decades of partisan attacks on the very idea of the necessity for self-governance, in favor of a belief that capitalism and markets alone can serve those political functions.

The conflation of these trends has made Americans, particularly, more vulnerable to what one might call a “cotton candy politics” of empty, but initially alluring surface claims focused not on reality, but on fears and perceived slights and with no awareness and less concern about their longer-term implications. Cotton candy is a superficially appealing treat with no nutrition value, but with long-term pernicious effects if consumed in undue quantities. By analogy, I share four brief current examples of this new form of politics here. All are familiar, and all have seen their full flowering during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and administration, which has both relentlessly exploited this trend and deepened it for purposes of mobilization and to serve the President’s personal narcissism and self-evident cruelty.

Perhaps most familiarly, Trump has argued with no evidence that refugees and immigrants constitute pariahs who arrive only to prey on American women and steal livelihoods from all other citizens. As a matter of historical fact, these very individuals have played and continue to play critical roles in building this nation. Trump’s egregious claims use perceived differences and the anxieties of residents most concerned about, and directly affected by, social and economic change to scapegoat ruthlessly and thereby undermine democratic norms and human rights. More, Trump’s assertions have trivialized the complexities of self-governance and life in a diverse community by arguing that these imagined “woes” can be addressed by constructing a wall that will keep “those” people out. Not only is this idea an infantilizing grotesquerie, it encourages the very anxiety it purports to alleviate. Nonetheless, this bluntness makes it a potent mobilization device for a population otherwise only partly engaged and aware, if listening at all. This rhetoric and the unreasoned policy it engenders separates Americans into favored and disfavored groups and thereby erodes the possibility for civic unity.

Trump has exacerbated the implications of these claims and actions addressed to “outside others” with systematic attacks on minorities within the American population. These verbal assaults have taken the guise of anti-Semitic campaign ads and comments, high profile defenses of Neo-Nazi and white supremacist sympathizers and continuing condemnations of transgender and Hispanic Americans. He has frequently alluded to a non-existent crime wave in the country’s cities and persistently denounced those he claims

## Max Stephenson's Tidings (continued)

are creating it, in an obvious gesture to fear and racial animus among a share of the nation's population. Again, he has launched these attacks particularly to appeal to an economically restive group in the body politic and his discriminatory claims have undermined citizens' sense of shared purpose and comity, even as they have violently scapegoated specific groups and subjected them to misplaced animus.

To these deliberate efforts to polarize, with their implications for civic capacity and shared norms, Trump has added a fresh embrace of torture in the guise of his nomination of an individual deeply involved in the George W. Bush administration's malignant and much-criticized infatuation with torture to serve as head of the Central Intelligence Agency. Trump apparently believes his action makes him appear "tough" to those who support him, but this move undermines in symbol and in fact the most elemental principle of the American regime. If Congress approves this nomination, it will endanger American men and women serving in our armed services by signaling that this nation approves of such practices and may well undertake them again. Leaving aside that potential, Trump's selection alone has besmirched the nation's ideals and its standing as a beacon of human rights and freedom in the world.

Finally, Trump has lately turned to international trade as another convenient and simplistic means to scapegoat others to appeal to the anxieties of a share of Americans. As he has done with immigrants and minorities, he has argued that "others," in this case, nations, have taken unfair advantage of past American officials' gullibility, including those of his own party, and that fact has cost laborers their jobs. To say the issue is not so simple is to understate how misleading Trump's claims are and continue to be. Still, at a superficial level for those millions of Americans not paying much attention, he appears to be "fighting" for those who have lost positions or status due to ongoing economic globalization. This perception can obtain among many, irrespective of the fact that his actions may well cost a share of those enamored of his othering rhetoric the positions they now possess and cost other individuals billions of dollars should trade wars ensue as a result of his ill-considered actions.

Taken together, these examples suggest that this form of politics seeks foremost to polarize and divide the citizenry into warring camps to the perceived advantage of its titular leader. It contemplates and encourages a thoroughgoing social tribalization. We have seen this before in our nation. In an essay published in 1871 in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Walt Whitman argued,

*Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.*

Whitman was surely correct that democracy cannot long withstand such a situation. And yet, our current politics can readily be so characterized. Trump's continuing attacks on the moral foundations and shared norms that comprise the fundamentals of our collective governance enterprise, together with long-lived educational, communication and political trends that have found citizens knowing less and less about their nation's institutions, but daily encouraged not to obtain the knowledge and capacities necessary to sustain them in any case, now endanger the Republic.

Whether the country writ large and its public officials—progressives or conservatives, and irre-

## Max Stephenson's Tidings (continued)

spective of their party affiliations—can find the wherewithal to overcome this multi-barreled denunciation of its democratic foundations remains an open question. What seems clear is that Trump's superficially appealing, but empty appeals to human fears and capacity for hate will continue, even as only the more difficult, but essential, task of deliberative discourse can prevent democracy's ultimate usurpation. In short, cotton candy politics, like its confectionary namesake, is insubstantial and empty, and ultimately the carrier and symbol of a host of significant maladies. It must routinely be unmasked for what it is and for its deeper and darker implications.

In my *Tidings* column of January 1, 2017, I argued the following:

One key role the Institute can play in light of these political trends is to continue to highlight these concerns and to evaluate their implications for self-governance and freedom and to do so as clearly and cogently as we can. We will continue to chart these changes in American politics in our daily work and in our reflections on those efforts as effectively as we can, as partisans, first and foremost, of civil and human rights and the freedom they both protect and represent.

In my view, that goal has never been more important for the Institute and the School of Public and International Affairs and university of which it is a part.

### Notes

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017, "How did U.S. students perform on the most recent assessments?" <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/> Accessed March 24, 2018.
2. Whitman, Walt. "Democratic Vistas," 1871, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/whitman/vistas/vistas.html> Accessed March 24, 2018.
3. Stephenson, Max, Jr. "Revisiting the Central Challenge of Democratic Self-Governance," *Tidings*, January 1, 2017, <http://tidings.spia.vt.edu/revisiting-the-central-challenge-of-democratic-self-governance/> Accessed. March 22, 2018.



## Commentaries & Essays

**Soundings** - a commentary from VTIPG Director **Max Stephenson**

March 19 - Of Democratic Greatness and Infamy <http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/of-democratic-greatness-and-infamy/>

March 5 - Mobilizing Rhetoric as Emblem of Enervating Democratic Capacity

<http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/mobilizing-rhetoric-as-emblem-of-enervating-democratic-capacity/>

February 19— On ‘Changemakers,’ Education and Democratic Self-Governance <http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/on-changemakers-education-and-democratic-self-governance/>

February 5 – “Scraping off the Essence of Things” <http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/scraping-off-the-essence-of-things/>

January 22— On Human Darkness and Democratic Possibility <http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/on-human-darkness-and-democratic-possibility/>

January 8—Revisiting a Central Puzzle of Democracy and of Current U.S. Politics (<http://soundings.spia.vt.edu/revisiting-a-central-puzzle-of-democracy-and-of-current-u-s-politics/>)

**Tidings** - a quarterly reflection from VTIPG Director Max Stephenson, now featured as the Director’s Letter in our Quarterly Newsletters beginning October 2014.

**RE: Reflections & Explorations** - Online essay series hosted by VTIPG, written by graduate students across the University to reflect on their ongoing work in governance and policy related concerns.

March 29—: [Prefabricating Poverty: The Political Implications of Prefabrication](#), by Reza Fateminasab, PhD student, Architecture and Design Research.

March 22— [Contemplating the Tensions Between Technical and Adaptive Approaches in International Development](#), by Ben Grove, PhD student, PGG.

March 15— [Everything old is new again: The Emergence of the European Coal and Steel Community as an Imperial Project](#), by Johannes Grow, PhD Candidate, ASPECT.

February 15— [Education for Human Development](#), by Vanessa Guerra, PhD student in Environmental Design and Planning in CAUS.

February 8— [Perspective, Power and Complexity at the Planning Table: Thoughts for NGOs Working in International Development](#), by Jeremy Elliott-Engel, PhD student ALCE.

February 2— [Compensation in Cuba: Employee Engagement and Motivation through a Socialist Lens](#), by Morgan Dean, PAPA Masters Candidate.

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