

RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Cultural renewal begins with prayers more than new policies

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 02.28.25



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As promised last week, I returned to the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC) conference in London, where that initial taxi ride from Heathrow proved prophetic. The driver's searching questions about society's future direction mirrored the deeper explorations unfolding within the conference halls.

I now turn to the gathering's substantive vision for navigating our "civilizational moment." What emerged over those three days was not merely critique but a framework for renewal that merits serious consideration.

The conference defied easy categorization, presenting a fusion of seemingly incongruous elements that, when assembled, formed a distinct cultural phenomenon. It combined the evangelical earnestness of a Billy Graham revival, the partisan esprit de corps characteristic of CPAC, and the polished presentation style popularized by TED Talks – all with production values aspiring to the gaudy spectacle of a Super Bowl halftime show.

Despite this potentially distracting amalgamation of styles, the substance remained steadfastly cerebral. The speakers maintained intellectual rigor that transcended theatrics, demonstrating that serious ideas need not be casualties of ambitious stagecraft.

During an exclusive breakout lunch, Bari Weiss (no conservative) cautioned against adopting the dangerous tactics of the left. She urged conservatives to uphold their principles rather than compromising them for political victories. She warned against seeking power simply because opponents have wielded it aggressively – and also against weaponizing government.

Emphasizing the significance of our moment, she encouraged a long-term perspective, noting that adversaries will lie and cheat to position themselves as the sole arbiters of truth, even when spreading falsehoods. However, she argued that conservatives understand truth, recognize evil, and appreciate the fragility of civilization. Because of that, she stressed the importance of applying this deeper understanding wisely, as the present is not just about winning but ensuring that victory serves enduring principles.

John Mackey, the former CEO of Whole Foods Market, delivered a vigorous defense of free markets, arguing that the period from the 19th century to today represents an unprecedented "hockey stick" improvement in global quality of life directly attributable to capitalism. He expressed concern that the United States has declined to 25th place in the Heritage Foundation's World Economic Freedom Index – a position now surpassed by the

Nordic countries. With evident passion, Mackey contrasted capitalism's historical record of increasing literacy and life expectancy over the past 250 years with what he characterized as socialism's legacy of coercion, murder and impoverishment.

Niall Ferguson, the Scottish historian, invoked his homeland's intellectual tradition by championing the Scottish Enlightenment as a model of "capitalism with love." He lamented that Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson (no familial connection was claimed) has been unjustly overshadowed by his contemporaries Adam Smith and David Hume. Ferguson highlighted Adam Ferguson's particularly relevant benchmark for national decline: when a country spends more on debt service than on defense – a threshold the United States crossed last year, thus meeting this historical criterion for a civilization in retreat.

In a complementary analysis, Peter Thiel addressed the fraying of generational progress, noting that for the first time in several generations, today's young people face diminished prospects compared to their parents. The venture capitalist delivered a sobering assessment that the longstanding expectation of middle-class parents – that their children would enjoy more prosperous lives than their own – has ceased to be a reliable premise in contemporary America.

We were treated to a remarkable array of intellectual and political voices, including Douglas Murray, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Kevin Roberts, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Scott Atlas, Sam Brownback, and many others. The program was punctuated by musical interludes, notably featuring Oliver Anthony. Jordan Peterson, the animating force behind the entire enterprise, made multiple appearances throughout.

David Brooks, who occupies the token conservative position at The New York Times, earned the dubious distinction of being the only speaker to provoke audible disapproval from the audience. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's name, although surfacing only occasionally, was referenced favorably.

Reflecting on the week's significance – its purpose and lasting impact – I find myself drawn to the prayer breakfast held one morning. Os Guinness delivered a lecture, after which we joined in a fervent collective rendition of "How Great Thou Art."

The readings included Psalm 46, my personal biblical touchstone. We concluded by reciting the Lord's Prayer simultaneously in our native languages, creating a curious linguistic dissonance that nevertheless achieved profound unity through our shared spiritual

commitment. In this moment of multilingual devotion, perhaps more than in any policy discussion, the conference revealed its essential character.

Perhaps in that sacred cacophony lies ARC's true purpose — not merely to diagnose civilizational decline but to remember what makes a civilization worth saving. Maybe renewal begins not with new policies but ancient prayers spoken in one voice.

Allen Mendenhall is Associate Dean and Grady Rosier Professor in the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University and Executive Director of the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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