

# Allen Mendenhall: Returning to the fundamental truths that positively shaped society

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 02.21.25



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The pale London winter light filtered through the taxi's windows as we wound our way from Heathrow's concrete sprawl toward the city proper. My driver spoke with an accent that sounded of somewhere far warmer than this gray English morning. Through delicate

conversational choreography – “How long have you called London home?” – his story emerged like a flower slowly opening: Zimbabwe, then London in 2000.

Politics tumbled out unexpectedly. Trump, he declared with the fervor of the converted, was a champion of the working man, a disruptor of calcified systems, and perhaps even a potential peacemaker for that distant war in Ukraine. His enthusiasm sparkled in the rearview mirror as he spoke.

Then, somehow, we drifted, as men often do in these intimate temporary spaces, into that eternal mystery: women. We shared our mutual bewilderment, laughing softly at our shared confusion, two strangers finding common ground in life’s perpetual puzzles. The great city rolled by, indifferent to our small confidences, as we drew toward the end of our brief encounter.

Here I was for the second-ever Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC) meeting, “an international movement with a vision for a better world where empowered citizens take responsibility and work together to bring flourishing and prosperity to their families, communities, and nations.”

Spearheaded by Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, ARC proclaims:

We believe we have reached a civilizational moment. Across the world, people are waking up to the choice we face: will we recover a vision of society that leads to freedom, prosperity, and flourishing, or will we resign ourselves to a future of increasing stagnation, division, and managed decline?

The conference assembled prominent figures from government, academia, media and the arts, with high security in place. Themes of hope and renewal were immediately evident. The event was structured around five key “streams”: our “civilizational moment,” responsible citizenship and the social fabric (culture), free enterprise and good governance, energy resources and the environment, and identity in the digital age.

With over 4,000 attendees, including many young people, the energy was palpable. Several older participants I spoke with drew comparisons to the World Economic Forum and the Aspen Ideas Festival, describing ARC as a more dynamic, principled, conservative and invigorating alternative.

Baroness Philippa Stroud set the tone with an opening address carrying the great weight of ancient wisdom. Rather than focus on innovation, she called for remembrance – a return to the fundamental truths that define human nature at its best. Cutting through the noise of modernity, she urged us to recall the principles that have long sustained human flourishing.

Stroud framed our civilizational crisis not as a challenge of forging ahead but of reclaiming what has been lost. Like archaeologists of the spirit, we were called to uncover and restore the forgotten foundations of freedom, dignity and truth. The way forward, she suggested, begins with a step back into the deep reservoirs of human experience.

British politician Kemi Badenoch championed classical liberalism in contrast to left-wing radicalism, emphasizing the importance of culture in shaping society. She asserted that “conservatives are the guardians of Western civilization” and, in rejecting total subjectivism, affirmed that “some cultures are better than others” — a reality, she argued, that must be acknowledged.

U.S. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, who was part of ARC’s advisory committee, joined via video conference thanks to ongoing budget disputes in Congress, delivering a speech in which he criticized “soft despots” for their use of censorship, surveillance and the welfare state. In an unintentionally humorous moment, he read the Declaration of Independence to a largely British audience. Emphasizing that a healthy society depends on the moral character of its people, he framed the movement he and ARC represent as an effort to restore power to the people through virtuous leadership. He described ARC as a favorable substitute for the World Economic Forum and declared, “This is our civilizational moment. The West is awakening to its opportunity.”

Peterson took the stage to frame the gathering as a crucial alliance between traditional conservatism and classical liberalism in the West. His analysis delved deep into the psychological and moral dimensions of contemporary politics. The left’s identity politics, he argued, represented not liberation but a form of hedonistic immaturity – a raw exercise of power seeking to bend others to its will.

In Peterson’s view, the fundamental distinction lies in competing visions of freedom. While the left pursues subjugation masked as liberation, traditional conservatives and classical liberals champion what he termed “virtuous freedom” – a concept rooted in biblical narratives of sacrifice and reciprocity. This vision demands maturity: the capacity to think across generations and recognize the mutual sacrifices that underpin civil society, a principle he traced through Western religious texts.

His contrast was stark: Where the left embraced immediate gratification and narrow self-interest, the conservative-liberal alliance represented a more profound commitment to voluntary self-sacrifice for the future good of the community. The left's hedonistic pursuit of power and short-term thinking stood opposed to a more profound understanding of society built on shared obligation and long-term flourishing.

Peterson characterized the event itself as a form of collective spiritual seeking – an assembly that transcended mere political strategy to become something akin to prayer. He suggested that the conference represented a unified reaching toward higher guidance about how to forge a Western civilization that could simultaneously expand both individual responsibility and authentic freedom. By framing the event in spiritual terms, he elevated its purpose beyond tactical political alliance-building to a deeper quest for civilizational renewal and moral clarity.

Os Guinness brought precision to the conference's central premise, clarifying that a "civilizational moment" carries specific historical weight. Such a moment, he explained, emerges when a civilization is disconnected from its foundational principles. At this critical juncture, three paths emerge: innovation and the creation of something entirely new, revitalization through reconnection with successful historical principles, or acceptance of decline and ultimate failure. Particularly significant was his observation about the West's historical cohesion – that faith, not authoritarian power, had served as the crucial binding force that unified diverse populations and traditions.

Arthur Brooks spoke on the nature of human happiness and how to cultivate it. He challenged the common belief that happiness is merely a fleeting emotion, arguing instead that it consists of three key elements: enjoyment (deep relationships and meaningful experiences, distinct from mere pleasure), satisfaction (the fulfillment that comes from overcoming challenges and achieving goals), and meaning (a sense of purpose, rooted in principles worth defending). While genetics play a role in happiness, he emphasized that individuals have agency in shaping their well-being. To build a truly happy life, he advised focusing on four essential investments: faith, family, friendship and meaningful work.

That London taxi ride now seems like a perfect prelude to ARC itself — a conversation bridging worlds, wrestling with change while seeking enduring truths. My driver's journey from Zimbabwe to philosophical debates in a London cab anticipated the conference's core question: How do we build a future of flourishing rather than decline? In next week's column, I'll delve deeper into how this ambitious group sought to answer that essential query.

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