

*As delivered*

**President Janet Napolitano  
Keynote Speech  
American Political Science Association Annual Meeting  
Hilton Union Square Hotel  
San Francisco  
4:00 p.m.**

When I enrolled at Santa Clara University in the 1970s, I thought I might be a music major. I played clarinet during high school in Albuquerque, and I was pretty good. My dream then was to become a professional musician. At Santa Clara, I soon realized that I was not good enough to be first chair at the New York Philharmonic, so I switched my major to political science, which fit well with my interest in public service.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1979, I set my sights on law school. Between then and now, I have practiced law, and politics, and public service. And now I have the privilege of leading the best public research university in the world.

From that vantage point, I can see, clearly, that it takes exceptional faculty to make a university exceptional. And I admire the teaching and vast range of research that professors of political science undertake: You are deepening understanding of politics, democracy and citizenship throughout the world. The knowledge you share and create — informing public choices about government, governance and public policy — is important now more than ever.

So, I welcome the opportunity to speak today to this audience — and, a little later, with Associate Professor Tom Wong of UC San Diego, about the intersection of immigration and higher education, among other topics related to politics and political science.

The question most on my mind these days is a complex one rooted in this country's political and ideological polarization: How can we safeguard both truth and freedom of expression when confronted with provocations that endanger our campuses and communities? Given troubling and tragic incidents that unfolded this past year at Berkeley, Middlebury College and Charlottesville, on the University of Virginia campus, it's a question that is unavoidable — and not easily answered.

Today, I will focus on one part of the larger question: How can we in the higher education community promote liberal democracy (that's lower-case "L," lower- case "D") without falling prey to what I call the "myth of many sides" — the myth that all sides of an argument have equal value. Princeton history professor Kevin Kruse recently shared examples of false equivalencies in history, and suggested that educators invite their students to find others. Among the examples he cited were Governors Earl Long of Louisiana and Orval Faubus of Arkansas, who likened the NAACP to White Citizen Councils opposing the integration of public schools after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the 1950s. Conservative intellectual William F. Buckley Jr., the founding editor of the *National Review*, once described moral equivalence in these words — quote — "To say that the CIA and KGB engage in similar practices is the equivalent of saying

that the man who pushes an old lady into the path of a hurtling bus is not to be distinguished from the man who pushes an old lady out of the path of a hurtling bus: on the grounds that, after all, in both cases someone is pushing old ladies around.” Well said.

The acts of violence in Charlottesville earlier this month represented an assault on the premises fundamental to our democracy, and an affront to all people who believe the strength of our future as a nation hinges upon our ability to become a more tolerant nation, a nation that fully respects and includes all Americans, in all of our diversity. It all began on the university campus where I earned my law degree — not just any campus, but at the university founded by Thomas Jefferson. It was, in the words of Charlottesville Mayor Michael Signer, “an attack on democracy itself.”

Signer — a scholar and author who earned his Ph.D. in political science at UC Berkeley — wrote in *The New York Times* that, quote, “Democracy, like a muscle, needs to be worked out,” end quote. And he called on colleges and universities to re-engage with the public while instilling the value of deliberation and civility in their students.

We must continue to speak out and act against the hateful tactics and goals of white supremacists and neo-Nazis — and ensure that our colleges and universities, and our nation as a whole, remain safe and civil for all.

So here is where the myth of many sides comes into play. It’s a falsehood to equate white supremacists or neo-Nazis with those who oppose their ideologies.

Truth telling, along with respectful listening, remains, of course, the essence of both teaching and learning. And creating new knowledge through research must continue to be a primary academic mission.

But all of us in the higher education community must do more to counteract misinformation, and outright bigotry.

So I urge everyone in this room, and political scientists everywhere, to embrace your public service role, in addition to your teaching and research duties. I know that many of you are already engaged with the public through written commentary or media appearances. I’m asking that each of you determine the best means, beyond your research and work in the classroom, to help the public distinguish between evil, long-discredited ideologies and the voices of reason, tolerance and moderation.

This is a unique time of false equivalencies, when real news is labeled fake news, and fake news is spun as the truth. So, the role of political scientists as sources of facts and context is more important now than ever. Speaking out may require only an email or a letter, or a call to an elected official. Some may aspire to serve in a more public manner, as public intellectuals, authoring op-eds, for example.

As the president of the largest public research university in the world, I know that it's not enough to teach and research. Public participation — public engagement — is a responsibility we in the academic world can and must embrace.

While preparing to speak here today, I could not help but recall the topic of a speech I delivered early last year at the London Business School. I had been asked to speak about political leadership in a world seen as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The organizers of that event used an acronym for those conditions: “VUCA” [VOOH-cuh], for “volatile,” “uncertain,” “complex,” and “ambiguous.” In my speech, I focused on the connection between education and “VUCA” [VOOH-cuh] challenges across the world.

I gave that speech exactly four months before the Brexit vote, and a little more than eight months before the U.S. presidential election. Now, in the eighth month of this presidency, our future seems more volatile and uncertain than ever — and complex, as well. Ambiguous? Not so much. The current threats to our democracy could not be clearer, even if the responses from some of our elected officials are sometimes ambiguous.

Speech not rooted in facts is proliferating. And it's increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish fact from fiction. Falsehoods undercut the role of science in society, as well as fact-based policy analysis. We see the negative impact on public policy when the findings of climate science are denied, just as the denial of the connection between tobacco and lung disease delayed policies in the past that could have saved lives. And false equivalencies feed false expectations when we're told, for example, that coal mining jobs will somehow reappear if we rewrite our environmental laws, rather than preparing workers for new careers in fields such as alternative energy.

Pluralism is supposed to provide a solid foundation for a strong democracy. But false equivalencies are corrupting the underpinnings of democracy — eroding faith in our public institutions. And falsehoods — the real fake news — are facilitating the rise of conspiracy theories, such as the “pizzagate” fabrications that spread like wildfire on the Internet near the end of the 2016 presidential campaign. So, the stakes are high.

Those of us in the academic community share a responsibility to guard against falsehoods and false equivalencies. The ideologies of white nationalists and neo-Nazis do not represent the truth by any measure. There is no place in American democracy for white supremacy. Period. But because there will always be a place in America for freedom of expression, even when it's hateful, we must counter the hate and falsehoods by shining a light on the facts.

The academic missions of teaching, research and public service enable us to deal with volatility, uncertainty and complexity in unambiguous times. This is an undertaking that is a marathon, not a sprint. We have generations of work to do, and the next generation to educate. We must be strong and we must be vigilant.

In the words of the University of California motto, “Fiat Lux” — Let there be light. I can think of no better motto for the work we need to do in the succeeding years. Thank you.