

## AN OPEN LETTER TO MY OLD TRIBE

By Arnold R. Isaacs

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"It could be days. It could be weeks until we find out who the new president is... Will you urge your supporters to stay calm during this extended period, not to engage in any civil unrest? And will you pledge tonight that you will not declare victory until the election has been independently certified?"

If those words sound familiar, it's because that was [Chris Wallace's final question](#) to the candidates a couple of weeks ago (though it feels more like several months) in the first presidential debate.

The answers — Joe Biden said yes, President Trump dodged — competed for headlines with many other contentious moments from that chaotic debate. But that was the most important question of the night, and it remains the most important question for the country as we wait for the candidates to answer it with their actions, not words, when election results roll in. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that the future of American democracy, perhaps its very survival, depends on the answer.

So, from an old journalist, here's a suggestion for every reporter who is covering this election at any level, be it local, state or national. Keep asking that question — that question. Not a platitudinous generality about a peaceful transition of power, but specifically posing the two commitments Wallace asked for: telling supporters to remain calm and waiting to claim victory until all the votes are counted.

Don't just ask Trump and Biden, either. Ask their running mates, their political allies, their campaign organizers and their spokespersons. And don't stop with the presidential candidates. Go down the ballot in your state and ask the same question of every candidate running for the Senate, House or any significant state or local office.

Before the era of Donald Trump, it's unlikely anyone would have felt the need to ask that question in a U.S. election. But this year it is vital to get candidates and other political actors on the record before Election Day, either promising to respect the voters' right to make their choice and to accept the choice they make, or sidestepping that commitment and having to answer for that evasion.

Beyond asking that one question, journalists in 2020 have a broader and deeper responsibility to recognize that the election's legitimacy and the threats to it are the true core issues in this

campaign, and ones that need to be covered more prominently, more proactively and more systematically.

That won't be easy in a time when seemingly every news cycle brings explosive distractions about the coronavirus pandemic, the Supreme Court, the president's health, police reform or any of a long list of other hot-button subjects. But the assault on public trust in the election is a clear and present danger to the entire American political system and the principles, traditions and values that uphold it. The news media need to adapt their political coverage to that new reality. Accordingly, here's another suggestion:

Starting now, reporters, editors and news directors across the country should cover the election process in their states as a running news story. Make it a beat of its own, alongside the customary coverage of candidates and voters' reactions. That means touching base every day with local and state election administrators, developing sources, and regularly telling your audience what those officials are doing to ensure a credible election, the status of absentee and early voting procedures, and how those votes are being handled.

Specifically on mail ballots, don't keep framing that subject as an episodic tit-for-tat partisan debate where the journalist's job is to report both sides (politician A says ballots will be fraudulent, election administrator B says they're safe). Instead, monitor and update your audience every day or so on what is actually happening: how many mail ballots were sent to voters, how many have been returned, how those ballots are stored and protected, and exactly when and how they will be opened and counted. Report problems as they appear and solutions as they are adopted — facts that will explain the situation as it truly is. Don't just leave it to readers and listeners to choose which side of the argument to believe, as much of the reporting on the mail-ballot debate has done so far, and don't just stick in a pro forma sentence telling them fraud is unproven without providing amplifying details. Instead, give them the knowledge to decide for themselves whether to trust or doubt the system and the ultimate results.

On the broader issue of real or imaginary vote-rigging, reporters should do everything in their power to get candidates and their minions to explicitly state before the votes are counted what they regard as evidence of miscounting or fraud, what their standard will be for contesting results in their or other races, and how they envisage conducting those contests.

As one concrete example, every news outlet in every state should demand on-the-record answers from governors and legislative leaders on whether or not they will commit to certifying the slate of electors that got the most votes in their state — a procedure that has been automatic in the past, but is not definitively guaranteed in law and [could possibly be subject to a partisan fight](#) in some states this year.

Journalists alone will not win the fight to protect the legitimacy of this election, but they can make an important contribution — perhaps the most important since reporters covering the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s helped make the country confront the realities

and the profound injustice of the segregation era. In the coming weeks, it will be absolutely vital for journalists everywhere, in every medium, to recognize the challenge and greatly intensify their efforts in rising to it. The stakes could not be higher.

*Arnold R. Isaacs, an author and writer living in Maryland, was formerly a local reporter, national and foreign correspondent and editor for the Baltimore Sun. His website is [www.arnoldisaacs.net](http://www.arnoldisaacs.net).*