



What's Wrong with Weird?

The ancient history of the latest political taunt

Charles McNamara

OCTOBER 2024

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. McNamara notes that some political commentators have praised Democrats' description of MAGA Republicans as "weird," while others have criticized it. What are the opportunities and risks of this rhetorical strategy? Is such a strategy a "sophomoric smear"? Does it undermine Democrats' purported acceptance of the nonconforming "other"?

2. McNamara argues that "obstinate weirdness—like what we see among the MAGA faithful—is a first step to autocracy." Why is this the case? How does "weirdness" or *ineptia* contribute to the erosion of democracy? Is "weird" an apt term for these circumstances? Would a different descriptor be better?

3. The essay offers a reinterpretation of Machiavelli's oeuvre. While Machiavelli has a reputation for cynical, self-serving politicking, McNamara argues that "[i]nstead of flattening Machiavelli into an apologist for thoughtless immorality, we should see him as a realist grappling with 'necessity.'" Are you persuaded by McNamara's account of Machiavelli as a political pragmatist? In your own politics, do you embrace a "realist politics of decorum" or an uncompromising and principled politics? Are there other options?

4. Where in contemporary politics do you see Machiavelli's political realism playing out? What figures come to mind? How is political realism faring right now in the United States?

5. What does compromise in politics mean to you? What issues would you be willing to compromise on for the sake of a greater good? Why those issues?

6. "A politician's refusal to negotiate with his...fellow citizens...is not only indecorous. It is anti-democratic." How have we seen our presidential candidates refuse to engage in negotiation with each other? Has this attitude trickled down into local political discussions you have experienced? How do we combat this "anti-democratic" refusal to engage?

7. McNamara mentions John F. Kennedy as an example of balancing different commitments. How did JFK handle the tension between pragmatic and principled politics? How might we draw on Kennedy's re-framing of the tensions between realism and idealism in our politics today?

8. Toward the end of the essay, McNamara discusses the merits of toleration. Labeling MAGA Republicans "weird" has a paradoxical relationship to this political value. In one sense, the term "weird" attempts to define and protect toleration by casting some attitudes and behaviors as beyond the pale; in another sense, it does not tolerate those who are intolerant. How do we navigate or reconcile ourselves to this paradox? How do you tolerate (or not) those with whom you disagree? Where are the breaking points of your tolerance and why?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

"In the Hands of an Angry Electorate," William Storrar, June 2016: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/hands-angry-electorate>

"Tolerance Among the Virtues," Molly Farneth, February 10, 2017: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/tolerance-among-virtues>

"Benjamin's Warning," Alexander Stern, December 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/benjamins-warning>

"Two Americas?" Nicholas Misukanis, August 2024: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/two-americas-0>