

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Hallowed Secularism

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian
Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly
Excellence and Professor of Law

1-27-2016

January 27, 2016: Don't Fight Mistrust; Deepen It

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism>



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2016). January 27, 2016: Don't Fight Mistrust; Deepen It. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/994>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly Excellence and Professor of Law at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Hallowed Secularism by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact beharyr@duq.edu.

Title: Don't Fight Mistrust; Deepen It

Date: 2016-02-07T06:40:00.000-05:00

2/7/2016—Jeff Greenfield, described as “a seasoned political journalist and author”, delivered a short video essay Friday night on the PBS Newshour highlighting “the end of trust by Americans in this country’s institutions.” He titled the essay “In Nothing We Trust.” Here is the website description: “Only 19 percent of American trust the government to do the right thing most of the time, according to a recent Pew Research poll, down from 77 percent in 1964. This lack of trust isn’t limited to the government -- Americans today distrust everything from churches to public schools. Journalist Jeff Greenfield offers an essay on how we became a nation of doubters.” You can see the video essay here. I’m showing it to my students in a couple of weeks. There are two questions to ask here. First, is such mistrust a bad thing? As Greenfield admits, Americans have always been skeptical about major institutions. Indeed, the slogan that he plays off of—In God We Trust—suggests that Americans have never trusted human institutions. The framers of the Constitution, if asked whether they trusted government to do the right thing most of the time, might well have also answered no. So, aside from whether American institutions are actually more corrupt in some sense or whether Americans themselves are more suspicious, you would not necessarily be unable to function politically because of such mistrust. Greenfield suggests that mistrust is a deep political problem. Maybe it is not. This leads me to my second question. Why don’t the pollsters ask the obvious follow-up question: do you trust yourself to do the right thing most of the time? The reason that Americans are so angry is that they feel betrayed. Greenfield may be right that we feel our institutions are failing us. But the reason the framers were able to view corrupting forces without this feeling of betrayal is precisely that they did not exempt themselves the way we do today. This is a theological perspective founded on a Protestant view of a fallen world. Americans act as if we are innocent and are betrayed by others. Actually, as Protestant thinkers have always pointed out—most recently perhaps Reinhold Niebuhr--we are not innocent at all. We are easily just as corrupt as a President Clinton or a Volkswagen or any other example you would like. And that would be a much healthier starting point for political life. That starting point might help assuage the anger and self-righteousness that characterizes American political life today. So, don’t fight mistrust. Deepen it.