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When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence back in 1775, he had no way of knowing that the very meaning of the word “truths” he wrote of as being “self-evident” would be called into question nearly 250 years later. Today, truth has, unfortunately, morphed into opinion; truth is conditional, inferential, and rarely contingent. Some truths are so strongly believed in, more widely accepted truths are disregarded, creating conflict. In a country that is profoundly divided along racial, political, religious and ideological lines, it is vitally important for our Democratic leaders to reach out across the divide and restore the meaning of “truth” using education and public outreach.

Education and public outreach will be powerful tools to use in the battle for truth. Media literacy programs, non-partisan authority figures, local clergy, doctors, and community leaders can all work together under a framework to reclaim truth. Social media has played a large role in the spread of non-truths, but it could also play a role in reeling in conspiracy theories and non-truths - not necessarily by shutting down accounts, but by pointing users to credible sources of truth. While most folks will believe what they want to believe and have been told repeatedly, they may respond more favorably if some common truths can be agreed upon, then built upon. Nobody wants to feel manipulated, but most people want to believe they share a set of common values and truths.

A government becomes illegitimate if it loses its people’s trust. There are two methods of maintaining the social contract: the intense fabrication method, which involves an unsustainable system of secrecy, or the easier, legitimate, tried and trusted method. Ultimately, legitimacy and truth have been hallmarks of American democracy, and must remain so. Our Democratic leaders will play an important role at this critical time in our history.