

# Peggy Noonan's Words to Live By

---

RCP [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/11/11/peggy\\_noonans\\_words\\_to\\_live\\_by\\_128692.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/11/11/peggy_noonans_words_to_live_by_128692.html)

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

November 11, 2015

In a June 4, 2010, Wall Street Journal column, republished in her new collection, “The Time of Our Lives,” Peggy Noonan tells the heartbreaking story of 28-year-old Detroit Tigers’ pitcher Armando Galarraga. Earlier that week, after retiring 26 consecutive Cleveland Indians, Galarraga had his perfect game unjustly taken away by first base umpire Jim Joyce’s botched call.

But “it’s everything after the blunder,” Noonan observed, “that makes the story great.” Joyce watched the videotape, realized his error, then headed immediately to the clubhouse to apologize to the pitcher. Galarraga graciously accepted.

“What was sweet and surprising was that all the principals in the story comported themselves as fully formed adults, with patience, grace and dignity,” Noonan wrote. “A lot of adults don’t teach kids this now, because the adults don’t know how to do it.”

By way of sports, Noonan touches on a disconcerting democratic tendency.

Plato knew nothing of baseball, but he saw a connection between democracy and the decline of adulthood. In “The Republic,” Socrates argues that democracies blur the distinction between adults and children, impelling them to dress alike, speak alike, and behave alike.

This egalitarian convergence, however, is not a meeting in the middle. Democracy does not encourage children to grow up more quickly. Rather, by indiscriminately eroding authority and relentlessly elevating the self, it causes adults to act childishly. Of late, the American experience seems to confirm the Platonic observation.

From informality of dress and casualness of locution to hypersensitivity to slights and shirking of responsibility; from prolonged adolescence—sometimes reaching well into the thirties—to mawkish displays on talk and reality shows; from disengagement from civic life to politicians who lie brazenly with every expectation that their side will embrace their bald-faced falsehoods as self-evident truths, adults in contemporary America exhibit childish self-regard, thoughtlessness, and petulance.

Universities, which increasingly resemble kindergartens for adolescents and the adults who are paid to educate them, have taken this immaturity to new heights. What lies behind higher education’s rage to outlaw hate speech if not the childish wish to punish name-callers? And

what drives campuses to convene kangaroo courts that presume the guilt of men accused of sexual assault if not juvenile impatience with the principles and procedures of the rule of law that for centuries civilized men and women have recognized as indispensable to liberty?

Against the backdrop of our distressing shortage of adults, Noonan's new book shines all the more brightly. The selection of columns and longer essays spans more than 30 years. She has always written as an adult.

In the early 1980s, Noonan worked as a producer in the CBS newsroom. She made her mark as a speechwriter in the Ronald Reagan White House, composing soaring oratory including the brief, stirring address the president delivered from the Oval Office in January 1986 a few hours after the space shuttle Challenger exploded barely a minute after liftoff.

Later she wrote several books, including admiring volumes on Reagan and Pope John Paul II and their monumental impact, and a book that took the measure of Hillary Clinton with uncanny prescience. In the 1990s, Noonan also published political reflections in *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, and *Time* magazine. At the *Journal*, she produces an eagerly anticipated Saturday column.

The granddaughter of Irish immigrants who preserved a vibrant memory of the old country along with a lively gratitude toward the new, Noonan rose from humble beginnings to the top of her several chosen professions. She has long counted among her friends the rich, the famous, and the powerful. At the same time, she instinctively sympathizes with and eloquently explores the preferences, passions, and points of view of working-class men and women.

Noonan's prose is marked by a democratic straightforwardness. She can be generous in praise but never fulsome; severe in criticism but never mean-spirited. She demonstrates a profound understanding of the ambitions that drive politicians while honoring statesmen, including Margaret Thatcher, who honor principle by translating it into policies that advance the cause of freedom.

One reason Noonan, who wears her patriotism on her sleeve, loves America is for its welcoming attitude toward immigrants and for its "still-startling social fluidity." At the same time, she condemns illegal immigration and insists on the need to secure America's southern border. Once border control has been established, she favors bringing out of the shadows those here illegally by providing some form of legal status. America, she affirms, is not the kind of country that rounds up and expels millions of people.

Noonan's is a tough love. She contends that America is in need of "cultural repair" because material abundance has brought selfishness, loneliness, and estrangement. She criticizes the self-esteem movement, which substitutes flattery of ego for cultivation of character. She writes movingly of her local Catholic churches in Brooklyn and Manhattan and the power of

faith to humanize. She also excoriates the church hierarchy for covering up priests' sexual abuse of children and, once the scandal was exposed, for putting the perpetrators' interests ahead of the victims'.

She can also be hard on her political party, and its top guns. She criticizes George W. Bush, for whose re-election in 2004 she took time out from journalism to support, with advancing in his 2005 inaugural address a preposterously ambitious foreign policy—"ending tyranny in our world"—and blamed him for badly mismanaging the occupation of Iraq.

In 2008, she found John McCain, though richly endowed with the "sterling virtues" of "Old America," out of touch with the "New America" that was gravitating toward a newcomer to national politics who effectively, although falsely, promised to pursue a politics that transcended both party and the racial divide.

She lambasted Mitt Romney for his unguarded statement in 2012 at a fundraiser in Boca Raton that the 47 percent of America dependent on government would never vote for him. "It sounded," she wrote, "like a kid new to politics who thinks he got the inside lowdown on how it works from some operative."

Whereas many columnists live for the withering partisan critique, Noonan excels at celebrating the best among us: the brave firemen—she disdains the term firefighters to describe those "manly men"—who hustled into the burning World Trade Center towers to save lives; soldiers fighting for their country in faraway places; and, individuals, like her grandmother who, as a young woman and brand-new immigrant, was forced to sleep on a New York City park bench her first night in America and who woke up the next morning to build a life in her new home.

Constitutional self-government is not child's play. To preserve it, those American adults increasingly inclined to behave like children—those, that is, who educate, govern, and pronounce daily from the nation's leading media platforms—must grow up.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*