FIRST PLACE:

Siddhu Pachipala ’27
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The wine was organic. The name tags were printed in Garamond. One of the guests, a man in his early thirties with a Georgetown Law tote and excellent posture, was explaining to a woman from a climate nonprofit why he no longer believed in “scaling civic engagement.” It had become, he said, “too dependent on platform logic.” She nodded. She understood.

This was Washington. Or New York. Or Cambridge. It didn’t matter much. The room looked the same: well-lit, over-credentialed, professionally concerned. There was a certain confidence in the air, but an ache beneath it, too. You could hear it if you listened hard enough—some trace of uncertainty about whether the right people were in charge, or whether they knew how to speak as if they were.

It is easy to mock this scene but harder to ask what it reveals. Because these elites are not frauds. They are often kind and almost always earnest. They believe they’ve done what was asked of them and think, on some level, that they have been selected by a fair process—that the doors opened because they were meant to.

It is this belief—that the elite *deserve* to be where they are—that has reshaped American public life in ways hard to name and harder to undo.

To understand the American elite, you have to start with what they think they’ve earned. The test scores, recommendations, carefully worded cover letters—these become more than milestones. They become a kind of secular sanctification. The system has chosen them. And from that selection, a quiet presumption emerges: The people who rise to the top are not only talented, but good. That those who hold power do so not because of accident or circumstance, but because they competed for it fairly. And won.

This is meritocracy in its most smug and seductive form: not just a method of sorting, but a moral story—one that flatters the winners and slowly erodes the idea that privilege might carry obligations.

The result is a class that governs but does not quite lead. It has passed through every major institution—universities, consultancies, nonprofits, media outlets—but has been formed by none of them. It is ambitious but unsure what to aim for. Consulting? Finance? Software engineering? It is polished, but not rooted. It professes democratic principles yet bristles at their mess. It calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion but lives hundreds of miles apart from the people most in need of uplifting.

They do not mow their own lawns. They do not serve on their school boards. They do not know anyone who goes to church three times a week or who has never left their home state. And that seclusion is not enough. They marry each other. They staff each other’s organizations. They listen to each other’s podcasts. They manage the country from inside a walled-off conversation.

The rest of America watches. Sometimes it seethes. Other times it shrugs. But always it senses that something is off—power no longer listens, expertise no longer explains. It senses that decisions affecting

millions are made by people who have never stood in a Walmart parking lot at dusk and felt what it is to be both invisible and blamed.

What we are living through is not just a crisis of inequality. It is a crisis of purpose. The people on top have forgotten what they're for.

And somewhere along the way, the practice of citizenship was hollowed out. The habits that once sustained democratic life—deliberation, sacrifice, judgment—no longer seem necessary. Politics becomes something expressive, not participatory. The citizen rages at institutions that no longer include him. The elite grows disenchanted with a public it increasingly sees as irrational, or dangerous. The social contract thins. Resentment fills the space where shared responsibility once lived.

We tell ourselves this is just how it is. We call it polarization. We call it disinformation. But underneath the symptoms is something older and harder to detect: the disintegration of the idea that self-government asks something of everyone, and most of all from those who lead. If there is to be renewal, it must begin with a recognition. Democracy is not sustained by procedures. It is sustained by people who still believe they owe something to others.

The people we ask to lead should be educated not only for employment, but for citizenship. We must ask ourselves what kind of people a democracy needs. What habits? What loyalties? What moral instincts? We must understand the limits of our own knowledge and look to the tradition that made the world we now inherit: Burke, Madison, Tocqueville. We must understand that the common good is not a technocratic problem to be solved as experts, but a responsibility to be shared as citizens. That power is not a reward, but a burden. That in a republic, status is not permanent—it is conditional, and earned in service.

In doing so, we must take the local seriously. We may teach federalism in civics class, but rarely give people genuine power over their daily lives. Local politics has become an afterthought—but it is only at the local level that self-government ceases to be theater and becomes real. This is why reforms like participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, and neighborhood deliberation forums matter. These are spaces where people must confront one another's needs face to face—where they are forced to compromise, to listen, to reconsider. It is through families, neighborhoods, churches, and civic associations that solidarity and mutual affection can be meaningfully built, far more so than in a nation of over 340 million people, most of whom we will never meet.

National service should be treated in the same spirit. When young people from different regions, backgrounds, and beliefs live and labor together—whether in disaster relief, education, conservation, or public health—they begin to see one another not as threats or abstractions, but as fellow citizens.

A democracy will always have its elites. But Buckley's quip about the Boston phone book still lingers for a reason. He saw what happens when the class that leads forgets who it leads—and why. That legitimacy, in a free society, is never inherited and never secure. It is earned. It is proven in service. It is renewed through sacrifice. And it is measured not simply by brilliance or background or the way one speaks in a meeting, but by the quiet, daily choice to bind yourself to the fate of your neighbors.