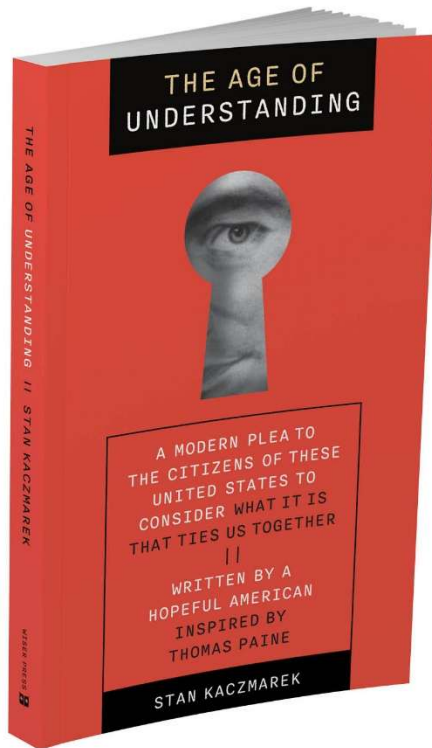


THE AGE OF UNDERSTANDING

by Stan Kaczmarek

Reader's Discussion Guide



1. **Understanding, Dialogue, and Unity.** The author argues that hate is a rejection of understanding and that understanding begins with listening carefully to another person's point of view. Do you agree that listening and honest dialogue can help create unity? What else might be needed to bring peace and cohesion to our nation?
2. **Political Courage and Public Service.** The author criticizes members of Congress who refuse to work across party lines to reach meaningful agreements. Do you think today's Congress is guided more by the needs of the public or by their desire to gain and retain power and wealth?
3. **Manipulation Through Anger and Fear.** What do you think of the author's claim that if the main purpose of a message is to make us angry or afraid, then language is being used to manipulate us? Do you feel we are usually given facts, or are we often given sound bites designed to trigger a fight-or-flight response?
4. **Symbols, Values, and Misuse.** Symbols such as the U.S. flag can communicate complex ideas—freedom, strength, and love of country—in a powerful and concise way. However, not everyone who invokes these symbols uses them in the spirit originally intended. Have you seen times when the flag or another symbol was used to promote a negative sentiment? The author refers to “a wolf in sheep's clothing.” What concrete examples come to mind?
5. **Simple Solutions and Deeper Causes.** Too often, complex problems are reduced to simple-sounding solutions such as deporting foreigners to stop violent crime. Quick fixes may sound appealing, but they often fail to address the deeper causes of complex problems. What is needed to broaden civic discussion on a variety of issues?
6. **Single-Issue Voting.** How can being a single-issue voter give power to politicians who use one emotionally charged issue, such as abortion to win office? Without knowing their stance on other important issues, might we unwittingly be giving them power that does not serve our best interest? How do you feel about one issue determining your entire vote?
7. **Evaluating Facts and Misinformation.** How can we determine whether the information we receive is factual or misleading? Consider these examples: Did Donald Trump lose or win the 2020 election? Was January 6th a violent and/or unlawful act, or was it a peaceful protest? Was the pursuit of war with Iran intended to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, or was it an attempt to show that brute force could control an old enemy? Is more education needed to build awareness of misinformation?

8. **Public Attention and Civic Responsibility.** Do you believe the average American has become too disconnected from the business of the country to understand what is happening behind the scenes? Have we depended too much on our representatives to make decisions for us? What is it that leads people to say that they don't want to get involved?
9. **Becoming Better Civic Leaders.** The author suggests several ways ordinary citizens can become stronger civic leaders. How do you respond to these ideas?
- Fight apathy by getting involved and voting in every election.
 - Vote for what a candidate stands for, not simply for the party they represent.
 - Expect more from leaders and vote them out when they do not meet the public's goals.
 - Make the country's business our business by choosing one or two issues to learn more about and develop a more complete understanding beyond the fragments often given to us.
10. **Money, Campaigns, Citizens United.** Do you believe the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, which removed certain limits on political spending, has diminished the voice of the average American? Are you overwhelmed by the amount of advertising funded by wealthy PACs and major donors, such as Elon Musk? Does this advertising provide new information, or does it simply repeat the same messages more loudly?
11. **Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Constitutional Limits.** Most people want government to be both efficient and effective. They do not want legitimate processes dismantled under the guise of making things better. Should a president be allowed to destroy systems established and funded by Congress without Congressional approval?
12. **Business, Regulation, and the Public Good.** Businesses that ignore worker safety, environmental protection, or fair competition can put the health and well-being of "We the People" at risk. Do you think today's emphasis on deregulation is meant to strengthen the economy, or does it mainly benefit corporations and the already wealthy by cutting costs?
13. **The Electoral College.** Five U.S. presidents have won the presidency without winning the popular vote because of the Electoral College. Critics argue that the current system violates the principle of "one person, one vote" since it gives more electoral votes per person to states with lower population. Supporters say it ensures candidates seek support beyond densely populated urban areas to ensure the needs of the entire country are addressed. Is the Electoral College still needed? Why or why not?

14. **Foreign Interference and Internal Division.** Do you believe foreign countries are trying to weaken the United States by sowing discontent among Americans? If they cannot defeat the country on the battlefield, can they harm it by encouraging hate, distrust, and infighting? If so, how are they doing this?
15. **Author's Purpose and Reader Response.** The author presents a point of view that may upset some readers, perhaps enough that they choose not to finish the book. Do you think the author intended to anger those readers, shake them out of complacency, or inspire dialogue? Could the same goal have been achieved in a better way?
16. **Self-Reflection.** If the book is successful, it should encourage readers to examine why they believe what they believe and whether any of their assumptions need to change. Did the book prompt that kind of reflection for you, even in a small way?