

“A Republic – If You Can Keep It”

Adapted from a presentation by Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore as part of the Bosworth Lecture Series

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On September 18th of 1787, at the conclusion of deliberations at the Constitutional Convention taking place at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, then 81 years of age and in failing health, was being carried home in a sedan chair when he came upon Elizabeth Powel, a very well-connected and wealthy Philadelphian who had hosted many of the delegates at her home during the Convention. Powel is reported to have shouted, “Well, Dr. Franklin, what have we got – a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin’s response was succinct: “A republic madame – if you can keep it.”

Well, we have managed to keep the republic for 237 years since that brief conversation took place on South Third St. in Philadelphia – but it has not been easy. Over the full course of those 237 years, there has been deep division and violent protests. The domestic tranquility written of in the preamble of the Constitution has certainly been disrupted.

Among other significant challenges, we survived the growing pains associated with establishing a federal government and moving from a confederation to a constitutional republic that vested significant power in a centralized federal government. Of course, that could only happen through compromise. The republic survived a second war for independence in 1812 – despite the British occupying Washington, DC and setting fire to the executive mansion (now known as the White House), the Capitol Building, and the US Treasury building. We survived a disputed election in 1824, through which Andrew Jackson received a plurality of both the electoral and popular vote but John Quincy Adams was elected President by a vote of the House of Representatives. Jackson supporters dubbed the results “the corrupt bargain.”

The nation was torn apart by a great Civil War in which more than 600,000 Americans perished. The post-war Reconstruction era was marked by constitutional victories, which ended slavery, provided equal protection under the law to the formerly enslaved, and enfranchised those freedmen. But, there was fierce sectional and social resistance to those amendments, vigilante violence and intimidation, and state Jim Crow laws that would result in one hundred years where much of the nation remained segregated and racial inequalities persisted in every aspect of American life.

The republic survived another disputed election in 1876 where once again a candidate, in this case Samuel Tilden, received a clear plurality of the electoral and popular votes but did not take office. Rutherford B. Hayes was elected by the House and spent much of his term shrugging off angry shouts of “Ruther Fraud” from disappointed Tilden supporters.

Our great republic has survived two world wars and two Red Scares – both marked by xenophobia, demagoguery, and witch hunts that pitted neighbor against neighbor—and we survived a great depression. It survived the tumultuous 1960s, including three horrific political assassinations, racial unrest, and a nation divided by an unpopular war. In the 1970s, the republic survived a presidential scandal that led to an unprecedented resignation and a national crisis of confidence in government and American institutions.

Once again, a disputed election in 2000 divided the nation and required Supreme Court intervention to settle the contest. There is really no comparison between the disputed election of 2000 and what

occurred in 2020, which gets so much attention in today's divided America. In 2000, the results were extremely close and the eventual loser's claims of irregularities had merit. Despite that, Vice President Gore conceded and attended the inauguration of President Bush. The nation moved on and was actually incredibly united after the horrific attacks of 9/11.

Yet here we are in 2024, and there are persistent questions regarding the survival of the republic, and the survival of American democracy, in these troubled and divided times. The "death of democracy" narrative is advanced from both sides of the political spectrum, and polling indicates that faith in American institutions is at an all-time low.

All too often our political dialogue today is vitriolic and marked by ad hominem attacks and lowest common denominator point-scoring rhetoric. We seem to be divided like at no other time in post-Civil War American history. Decorum, respect, and decency have given way to grandstanding, auditioning for cable news appearances, and a quest for social media views and likes. Families have been divided by politics, in some cases breaking what appeared to be unbreakable familial bonds. Political shock theater has become an industry, and far too many Americans never remove themselves from their political comfort zone – refusing to at least explore varying viewpoints.

There exists a dangerous narrative that suggests that the party or candidate you are *not* aligned with is a danger to the survival of the nation, and that there is an existential fight between good and evil that is being waged in every political contest. Too many of our political candidates no longer acknowledge legitimately losing an election and refuse to show any grace in the face of defeat. Accepting defeat after all legal remedies and challenges have been exhausted, and participating in the peaceful transfer of power, has been a shining example of American exceptionalism for 71 years before the Civil War and 150 years after. This all does tremendous damage to the health of the republic.

Of course, it has not always been this way in post-Civil War America – there was a time when decorum ruled, and compromise was not a dirty word. There was a time when we did not see each other as enemies just because we may have a different point of view. There was a time when we accepted that our political opponents loved the country just as much as we do – while acknowledging major differences as to what policies would best serve the nation. There was a time when we trusted the American people to sift through the marketplace of ideas and make an informed vote. There was a time when Speaker Tip O'Neil, a Democrat, would sit down and have a drink with President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, after a long day of battling it out on the issues. This is not to suggest that the 'good old days' were good in all ways, or that there were not bad acts and bad behavior in the political arena, because of course there were. But, when we narrowly focus on the political process and the level of decorum and civility of our public debate, on the whole, we did much better from the start of World War II through the early 2000s than we are doing today.

So, what do we need to do today to "keep the republic"? I would offer two suggestions, both borrowed from wise men who predicted that the republic would face just these sorts of challenges and in turn, provided guidance as to how meet said challenges. The solutions are well within our grasp, but it will require a national effort that starts with the work of individual citizens. The first is a return to virtue.

In the three decades following World War II, 75% of the members of Congress were veterans. This shared history resulted in a common bond, despite party affiliation, that placed country above self. There were passionate disagreements but there was decorum, respect, and compromise. There was no doubt that the people in the room were committed to serving their country and that they were there for the right reasons, even when they may have been wrong on the issues (the civil rights battles come to mind). And when they vehemently disagreed on policy, the disagreement was not personal.

It was not personal because when you serve in the armed forces, you depend on the person next to you. You serve for the greater good, and the last thing on your mind, especially in a combat situation, is the party affiliation or political beliefs of the people you are serving with. The culture of the federal legislature was established by those who served the country and understood that the health of the republic was much more important than their political ambitions.

By comparison, today, roughly 18 percent of the members of Congress have served in uniform and by and large, with only a few notable exceptions, the veterans in the US House of Representatives and the US Senate conduct themselves in a way that promotes decorum, decency, and respect. Rhode Island claims the perfect example of this in our senior senator, Senator Jack Reed.

The firebrands, the attention-getters, the cable news regulars – in just about every case, have not served in uniform.

Now I am certainly not advocating for an entirely veteran membership in the federal legislature, but it is important to identify the type of person we want to serve in public office. To understand how we want them to carry themselves and that we want them to place country above self. We want them to negotiate and compromise in good faith to move the nation forward.

What I'm talking about is a return to the Founding Fathers' belief that a republic can only survive if it is led by virtuous people, who are elected by virtuous people. On many occasions, Benjamin Franklin said, "only a virtuous people are capable of freedom." It is important to note that virtue is not perfection. Franklin was far from perfect – every human being has flaws, we all stumble – but it is the willingness of the individual to sacrifice their personal interests for the good of community that defines virtue. It is about serving the greater good, the general welfare as the Constitution's preamble demands. James Madison said that "no form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people." Thomas Jefferson, another imperfect man, said and believed that, "Virtue is not hereditary – it has to be earned and it has to be learned. Neither is virtue a permanent quality in human nature. It must be cultivated continually and exercised from hour to hour and from day to day." We as a nation must begin to value virtue in our elected officials. It must be the first litmus test for every voter.

We must be able to evaluate whether or not a candidate will sacrifice their political fortunes by compromising and doing the right thing for their community, state, and country – even if it is politically hard. We need to elect people who are humble, who avoid the caustic language that permeates so much of today's political narrative. People who will listen, and not just wait to speak. People who can recognize the humanity in their political opponents and refuse to demonize them. We need to elect people who can admit failure without excuse. John F. Kennedy wrote about this type of public servant in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, and he practiced it in taking full responsibility for the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion. The most memorable quote from President Kennedy's press conference regarding the Bay of Pigs was his reference to an old saying, "Victory has one hundred fathers – defeat is an orphan." We need more elected leaders who are willing to be orphans and take responsibility for mistakes. Americans truly appreciate that type of accountability.

In a recent commencement address, the great documentarian and historian Ken Burns said that "leadership is humility and generosity squared." Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, and John Adams would all have agreed. Ken Burns is talking about virtuous leadership. Martin Luther King Jr. put it a different way, saying, "I am not interested in power for power's sake, but I am interested in power that is moral, that is right, that is good."

In 1838, a young Whig State Representative from Illinois gave a speech to the Young Men's Lyceum Club of Springfield entitled *The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions* in which he lamented what he saw as

an environment of lawlessness and political violence, which he referred to as “mobocracy,” and lack of virtue among the men who were engaging in the aforementioned. That (at the time) unknown 28-year-old politician was Abraham Lincoln, and he feared that as the founding generation began to pass, we as a nation would be prone to political violence and lawlessness directed by, as he put it, “talented, self-serving, (unvirtuous) men who would succeed in destroying our political institutions.” The most famous quote from what is now, but was not then, a famous speech reads as follows:

At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years. At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

So what was young Abraham Lincoln’s solution to preserving our political intuitions and the republic itself? Civic education. He called for a redoubling of effort around the teaching of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. He wanted the principles and tenets embedded in the founding documents to be topics of constant conversation at home and in the public square, and seriously studied in the nation’s schools and universities. He called for a religious fervor around the discussion of and adherence to the concepts in the founding documents. He wanted Americans to know their history and how their government works, and to be engaged citizens who would work toward a more perfect union with a deep respect for the rule of law and a belief in service for the common good. He wanted Americans to celebrate the concept of a successful liberal democracy characterized by an independent judiciary, a robust system of checks and balances, free speech, a free press, the rights of the accused, and the rights of the minority. He wanted us all to be students and teachers of American history, government, and civics.

At the Rhode Island Department of State, we are following Lincoln’s lead. We have ramped up our Civic Education and Engagement Division and have implemented robust programming. We are helping to implement the 2019 legislation that I was proud to sponsor with Representative Brian Newberry (a Republican) that mandates at least a semester of American Government and Civics for every Rhode Island public school student between grades 8 and 12. Each student must engage in an action civics project in their community or school to earn credit in the course. It was very important to me that the legislation was bipartisan because civic education is bipartisan. The Declaration of Independence is bipartisan. The Constitution of the United States is bipartisan.

I have visited nearly 70 classrooms, delivering lessons on the history of voting rights and the duties and responsibilities of American citizens. We speak often about our individual rights, guaranteed by the Constitution, and that is very important, but we need to also speak of the duties and responsibilities of American citizenship. Those duties and responsibilities are what “promotes the general welfare” and establishes an “American community.”

Our Department has conducted mock elections at middle and high schools all over the state, using real ballots and our state’s actual voting machines. Our staff monitors the elections, announces results, and

gives students an opportunity to experience voting before they are legally able to do so. The enthusiasm around the mock elections, which can be issue-oriented, class elections, or participatory budgeting decisions, is incredible. We have partnered with schools on participatory budgeting programs and voter registration drives.

We have established the Student Civic Leadership Program, through which last year, 86 students from 42 high schools around the state met monthly. In the spring, students convened for a three-day Civic Leadership Summit. They learned the skills of *civil* civic engagement. They learned how to access their State government, spent a day at District Court, met with state leaders, legislators, and media personalities, and so much more. Their learning experiences culminated in action, as completion of the program requires that each student plan and carry out an action civics project in their school or community. Most importantly, the student civic leaders interacted with students from all over the state – students of different races, religions, and backgrounds – and they got to know each other and respect each other as fellow human beings, fellow Rhode Islanders, fellow Americans. A student from Central Falls and a student from St. Mary's Academy (Bay View), who may have otherwise only interacted on a playing field, are now together discussing the issues of the day, sharing their perspectives, and becoming familiar with each other in a way that can only promote civility, respect, and understanding. We look forward to continuing this program for years to come.

I believe the path forward is a return to valuing virtue in our political leaders and a steadfast commitment to nonpartisan civic education, while at the same time demanding that our politics, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, reflect our “better angels.” America has always been about advanced citizenship and this effort will require advanced citizenship – if “We the People” intend to keep the republic.