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A photograph of five hikers with backpacks walking across a rocky mountain ridge. The scene is reflected in a pool of water in the foreground. In the background, there are large, snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky.

*The Grace and
Power of Civility*

*Commitment and Tolerance
in the American Experience*

Essays on Deepening the American Dream

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THE GRACE AND POWER OF CIVILITY

COMMITMENT AND TOLERANCE IN THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

David M. Abshire

THIS ESSAY DRAWS FROM both the great moments and the nightmares of the American experience. It tracks how two elements of our political culture can appear to be contradictory and yet at the same time be recognized as major characteristics of the American experience. The elements to which I refer are a passionate, driven commitment to a cause or idea and the tradition of tolerance, compassion, and inclusiveness.

I argue that in the great historical accomplishments of America, these apparent opposites—commitment and tolerance—are bridged by civility. Civility, as used here, is not simply following rules of etiquette and decorum for the sake of tradition or in order to coat over any differences. In its deepest sense, civility means respect, listening, and dialogue. It does not mean watering down or giving up cherished principles. Indeed, civility has often been exercised in the American experience in order to move to the higher, common ground. In his writings on civility, Stephen Carter reminds us of “two of the gifts that civility brings to our lives: first, it calls for us to sacrifice for others as we travel through life. And, second, it makes the ride tolerable.”

In the American experience, civility has not always prevailed, and its role in our political culture cannot be taken for granted. Accordingly, we must review some of the nightmares of incivility in American history to warn of the severe national polarization that could paralyze us in the coming years. We must take lessons from the past to face such challenging issues as the global war on terrorism; conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the turbulent Middle East; the threatened solvency of Social Security and Medicare; the need to reduce the looming national deficit; the K–12 crisis in public education, widespread anti-Americanism; and

the erosion of character-based leadership in the United States in almost all walks of life: in the clergy, in our schools, in heads of business, and even in the presidency.

If we can listen to each other with humility, the positive—almost sacred—accomplishments and qualities of the American experience can enrich and fortify us to live the fullness of the American dream.

The Public Climate: The Determined Choice of Trust over Cynicism

A 2003 poll by the Pew Research Center showed a nation “profoundly polarized between two political camps that are virtually identical in size but inimical in their beliefs on virtually all major questions.” How has this come to pass? Why has a political void grown to the widest it has been since the center began polling sixteen years ago despite the unity following the attacks of September 11, 2001? Why is our country more polarized than ever and cooperation less and less common? Is it because the very fiber of our society—the institutions of governance, the engines of the economy, civil society, and our concept of individualism—have been lost to partisan, economic, racial, and religious schisms? Certainly, at the time of this writing, we have faced one of the most contentious presidential campaigns in our history, and even members of Congress speak of their own legislative body as dysfunctional.

But we must look beyond today’s events to understand this new age of incivility and disunity. Since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the present state of world affairs, America has suffered from an identity crisis. Even in its moment of triumph as the world’s only superpower, the United States has at times floundered, realizing that global leadership requires certain commitments but remaining divided as to what those commitments should be. Often perceived as too unilateral and sometimes as a bully, the United States has witnessed rising anti-Americanism around the world and the slow defection of some of its oldest allies. At home, the American people are more ideologically divided than they have been in decades. Pollsters now describe the Union in terms of “red and blue states.”

Yet even in our present crisis of division, we see hope in a vision of the American identity that was never really lost, only misplaced in the tumultuous modern world. As I will recall several times in this essay, on September 11, 2001, we were a people united by our common beliefs—our need for security, our love of freedom, and our resolve to respond effectively to this outrageous crime, not just against America but against

civilization itself. We remain bound, whether we show it or not, by certain principles that are elusive but powerful. On September 11, we remembered who we are and we chose civility.

The images were powerful: the president at ground zero surrounded by first responders, then at the Islamic Center declaring Islam a religion of peace, then at an ecumenical service at the National Cathedral. Our nation was bound by a new connectivity. In the words of Alan Wolfe, we found ourselves “one nation, after all.” This memory shows how our nation can unite to achieve great things in a great moment. It is a tragedy that those few months of national, moral, and spiritual unity were so soon lost.

Yet even in an increasingly uncivil Congress, there remain many examples of civility. For instance, the chair and ranking members of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees (Senators Richard Lugar, Joe Biden, John Warner, and Carl Levin) are close and work together regularly on issues of common concern. It is worth noting that for several years, Senators Bill Frist and John Kerry have chaired the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Commission on Global AIDS, which improved President Bush’s legislative support. But clearly the cases and occasions are fewer than they could be, especially in the House of Representatives.

Drawing on the “American experience,” which, then, is the true America? The America of division or the America of unity? The America of the red and blue states or the America symbolized in the harmony of red, white, and blue in its flag? The America of endless public and partisan warfare or the America of cooperation, civility, and common purpose? The America of many or the America of one?

America’s History

A decent respect for the opinions of mankind.

—The Declaration of Independence

In fact, America has two histories, the history of commitment and the history of tolerance. The better-known version of commitment is the one written by the winners, those who through strength of arms, power of mind, and sureness of purpose wrenched thirteen colonies away from their imperial masters and forged a nation unique in the history of the world. This is the passionate America born of courageous principles—commitment to the fundamental principles to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is the America of the revolution that defied King George III, the America of the Declaration of Independence, the America of the

“greatest generation” that defeated Hitler’s tyranny, and, if I might add a personal note, the America that I experienced fighting for freedom in Korea.

But there is another history and another force that has seen America through some of its most difficult challenges. This story is less glamorous, to be sure, but perhaps even more important. It is marked by countless unsung instances of peaceful disagreement resolved in a spirit of give-and-take and fair play. The foundations of our government that still persevere today were laid during this period. This is the America of compromise and collaboration in the face of differences when strong personal convictions were balanced by a willingness to work for the common good. It is the America of Lincoln’s “malice toward none and charity for all.”

Neither history tells the whole story because it is the interaction of these forces, of commitment and tolerance, of passion and civility, that has been the hallmark of the American experience. Indeed, while commitment without tolerance produces a sort of zealous, destructive fundamentalism, tolerance without commitment entails a moral reserve that can degenerate into moral vacuity or paralysis (“One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”). In the balance of these forces lies the genius of the American experience. As words, *tolerance* and *civility* carry a certain semantic baggage, the product of use and sometimes misuse. As is often the case, the best definition is a clear statement of what the word does *not* mean. It must be clear that tolerance is *not* a surrender of conviction. Tolerance does not require one to sacrifice personal ideals or water down beliefs to a toothless “least common denominator.” As Michael Novak points out, “To be tolerant is by no means the same thing as to believe that any proposition is as true as any other. . . . Our Constitution does not reduce tolerance to some form of moral equivalence, to degrade the truth of things.” At its best, tolerance promotes a marketplace of ideas where diverse viewpoints collide to create a higher level of understanding.

Former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker also expressed the importance of tolerance in leadership, when speaking about his “Baker’s Dozen,” a list of rules for Senate leadership. Two of his rules contain elements essential to tolerance, to “have a genuine respect for differing points of view” and to “listen more often than you speak.”

Senator Baker asked that we remember that “every Senator is an individual, with individual needs, ambitions and political conditions. None was sent here to march in lockstep with his or her colleagues, and none will. But also remember that even members of the opposition party are susceptible to persuasion and redemption on a surprising number of issues. Understanding these shifting sands is the beginning of wisdom for Senate leaders.”

Senator Baker admitted to having been admonished by his late father-in-law, Everett Dirksen, to “occasionally allow yourself the luxury of an unexpressed thought.”

As we later review the characteristics of civility in American leadership, it will become clear that successful leadership tends to exercise the virtue of inclusiveness. This has been a mark of our greatest presidents. Their gift for coalition-building and marshaling the resources of the nation in times of war and peace required inclusion rather than exclusion of the very best and most creative minds in the country. The civility element of tolerance also involves incorporating the best and most innovative ideas, regardless of differences of politics.

In the realm of religious rights, an area where the necessary balancing act between tolerance and commitment is perhaps most dramatically evident, tolerance does not mean freedom from all religion or banishment of religion from the public square. Rather, for America’s founders, it meant freedom to practice devoutly the religion of each person’s choice, or not to practice religion at all, without fear of censure from members of another faith or the government. Tolerance does not require that we accept the *absence* of God but rather the *mystery* of God. Tolerance requires that we, to paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, be willing to doubt a little of our own infallibility.

Furthermore, tolerance means more than simply permitting opposition. In a letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, George Washington noted the importance not just of tolerance but of respect for the conscience of others. Indeed, tolerance requires respect for the presence of opposition and demands listening, common goodwill, and an acceptance of personal frailty—what I call civility. It is this civility that, in the words of Professor Ted Gup, produces an “ennobling effect upon those who rise above themselves.” Only with mutual respect can tolerance and civility become an engine of constructive exchange helping all parties see further into the heart of a problem.

Tolerance and civility are not easy. Gup continues, “Some may never wish to break bread with those whose conduct, though lawful, they find loathsome, whose beliefs they find heretical, and whose message they think traitorous. And yet they are called upon to suffer them because *that is who we are as a nation*—not a people bereft of private values but a *people enriched by a stubborn willingness to endure each other*” [emphasis added].

Tolerance and civility, in other words, lie at the very heart of what it means to be an American citizen and at the very heart of the message that we must communicate about ourselves as individuals and as a political culture. Frankly, this is what makes us different from so much of the

world. This is the image of America that we must communicate overseas, in place of the current one of a too often arrogant America. Our Declaration of Independence itself called for a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind,” which means global leadership with modesty, the very traits that George W. Bush called for in his first election campaign.

The Colonial Period

We must be knit together in this work as one man.

—John Winthrop

Echoes of this particularly American emphasis on civility and tolerance are everywhere, from the early colonial days and the founding of the Republic to the resurrection of the Union. We need only listen.

What a sense of awe they must have felt, those early Puritan settlers, as they courageously sailed out of England on a March morning in 1630, leaving behind years of religious turmoil en route to establish their vision of God’s kingdom on earth. They were deeply devout people, committed to reforming the Church of England from within and establishing in America a “city on the hill” which would be to the entire world a beacon of Christian righteousness. Ronald Reagan—ever the optimist—so admired the story that three centuries later, he attempted to improve a bit on the Bible and the Puritans by calling America a “shining city on the hill.” These were not small goals, and they were not small people. Theirs was a commitment so intense that American history would be forever shaped by their deeds. But contrary to popular myth, it was not just commitment that drove Puritan society. For all the caricatures painted of the Puritans—the self-righteous reformers, the nosy neighbors, the witch-burning zealots—their communal ethic is one that required no small amount of civility and, yes, even tolerance.

“We must be knit together in this work as one man,” wrote John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as his ship crossed the Atlantic, “that we, and our seed, may live; by obeying His voice.” The New England town would quickly become the very epitome of a tight-knit society that made civility a precondition to daily survival. Each town agreed to establish a covenant that formally articulated consensual agreements on most matters affecting public and private life. Disputes were handled through arbitration, first by a group of neighbors and then, if necessary, by the town, assembled weekly at the now iconic town meeting. This was an intentionally nonlitigious society where social harmony was achieved through consensus, not conflict.

To be fair, though, the Puritan “Bible commonwealths” had many shortcomings. Not all dissent was handled quietly at town meetings or tolerated for the maintenance of unity. Roger Williams, perhaps the best known of the rebellious Puritans, criticized the Massachusetts settlement for its lack of religious purity. He had qualms with the mingling of church and state, by which civil officials could increasingly influence religious matters. He preferred a complete separation from the Church of England—“perfection,” in his view, was not simply purification of the faith. Thus when Williams established freedom of the individual conscience and religious toleration in Rhode Island, he did so to promote what he saw as an even truer Christianity than the Puritans sought in Massachusetts.

Williams sought freedom to worship, not freedom from worship, and in doing so established a model of religious society that would later inspire the founding fathers and the U.S. Constitution. Perhaps it was his commitment that assured the mercy of Governor Winthrop, who, by the standards of the time, could have punished Williams far more severely. Instead, in an act of tolerance, Winthrop let him depart for Rhode Island.

Another colonial experiment with religious toleration took place in Maryland, led by the second Lord Baltimore, Cecilius Calvert. After receiving a joint-stock company charter similar to Winthrop’s for Massachusetts Bay, Calvert sought to establish his colony as a Catholic refuge in the new world. He quickly found that “Catholics could survive in the English world only as a tolerated minority; they were in no position to impose their will on others.” To *protect* his religion, then, Calvert passed the Toleration Act of 1649, what scholars have called a “bold move for that era.” The act even anticipates our modern constitutional statement on religious freedom and deserves quoting: “No person or persons whatsoever within this Province . . . professing to believe in Jesus Christ, shall from henceforth be in any ways troubled, molested or discountenanced for or in respect of his or her religion nor in the free exercise thereof within this Province.”

This “free exercise” clause is one predecessor to our First Amendment clause outlawing legislation “prohibiting the free exercise” of religion. Even though the Maryland act extended freedom of worship only to Christians, it was nonetheless a historic step toward the preservation of religious diversity and commitment.

Following on these early traditions of religious toleration, Thomas Jefferson, a deist, drafted in 1779 for the Virginia State Legislature the “Act for Establishing Religious Freedom.” Like Roger Williams, Jefferson declared the awareness that “Almighty God hath created the mind free” and that “all attempts to influence [the mind] by temporal punishments

or burdens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion.” Here again, religious freedom is meant to preserve the true meaning of the “Holy Author,” not to dilute or usurp it. Jefferson, in fact, was so fond of this act that he had a reference to it engraved on his tombstone along with the better-known inscription, “Author of the Declaration of American Independence.” He makes a similar argument for religious freedom in his “Notes on the State of Virginia,” where he writes, “Had not the Roman government permitted free [religious] inquiry, Christianity could never have been introduced. Had not free enquiry been indulged, at the era of the reformation, the corruptions of Christianity could not have been purged away. If it be restrained now, the present corruptions will be protected and new ones encouraged.”

Neither is this ethic of tolerance with commitment strictly for the religious. The American religion has become as much a civil religion as a spiritual one and is as important in politics as it is in theology.

As James Morone concludes in his book *Hellfire Nation*, America’s colonial religious foundation created a “nation with the soul of a church,” a “brawling, raucous, religious people” whose moral fervor inspires dynamic revivals in its faiths—political, social, and religious. Around the world, that fervor gave us a providential mission as a redeemer nation. At home, fervor drives two great moral paradigms from opposite sides of the political spectrum: first, an individualistic ethic of “strength, patriotism, and manliness” and the politics of good versus evil, and second, a new social gospel of communal responsibility and corporate solutions. Though both sides are deeply rooted in different moral convictions, Morone maintains, we “remain Puritans all.”

The Founding

Different interests necessarily exist.

—James Madison

Roughly a century after the seeds of community had been planted on American soil, another generation—perhaps the greatest generation—of deeply committed yet practical leaders emerged. “They had great gifts,” writes philosopher Jacob Needleman of our founding fathers, “and due to fate or chance or perhaps providence, great currents of human and social energy passed through them.” They had first the gift of commitment to forming a new kind of nation, not of a distinct tribal, ethnic, or racial identity but of a philosophical identity holding liberty, justice, and freedom as the nation’s fundamental principles. Needleman says, “America

was an idea,” and our founders’ commitment to that idea brought forth on the continent a *new* nation—new not just in years but in character. Some historians have labeled the founding period the “Age of Passion”—a “decade-long shouting match” filled with “shrill accusatory rhetoric, flamboyant displays of ideological intransigence, intense personal rivalries, and hyperbolic claims of imminent catastrophe.” True to the present thesis, however, none of our founders’ great achievements would have been possible were it not also for their gifts of civility and tolerance. Quite literally, the founders regularly broke bread together even while locked in what must have seemed like political battles to the death.

Many authors have argued that this powerful civil religion bound the founders together with a sense of common purpose despite their divergent interests. Catherine Albanese suggests in *Sons of Our Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution*, that “the American Revolution was in itself a religious experience”—the thread, that would knit this next generation of Americans together. If that was the case, it was a powerful religious experience indeed, for the founding period is filled with example after example of compromise and collaboration.

The most dramatic collaboration of the federal period was between James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. Of the principal founders, Hamilton was the most nationalistic, almost a monarchist. He wanted to install a president-for-life and to delegate almost no power to the states. At the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton made an exhausting speech advocating a lifetime chief executive with complete power to veto state laws. The shock in the hall was so great after his four-hour exposition that the next day he recognized that he had made a political blunder. Fortunately for the Republic, Hamilton realized that he would have to compromise, accept some ideas and wisdom from others, and work within more temperate and pragmatic constraints. His partner in this enterprise became thirty-six-year-old James Madison, who talked of an “adjusted federalist” system.

In the scorching summer of 1787, Madison took his so-called Virginia Plan to the fifty-five reform-minded delegates who had gathered in Philadelphia to reshape the government of the young nation. They faced the seemingly impossible task of rectifying the “principles of ’76,” which rejected centralized authority, with the need for a stronger national government that could unify the states. Madison’s plan, endorsed by Hamilton, called for a strong national government.

George Washington had tentatively agreed to preside over the Constitutional Convention. After four months of closed debate, the delegates worked through a laundry list of sticking points until they came to two

major areas of contention—the clash between the small and large states and the clash between the agrarian south and the commercial north.

Fierce debate marked the process that ultimately ended in a compromise document. Madison, who outlived the other founders, eventually became the last authority on the “original intent” of the framers and was frequently quizzed on the matter. His standard response was to refer others the debates at the time of ratification. “Everything,” he said, was argued out then.

Madison had won over Hamilton, who came to see the strategic value of dropping the word *centralization* and cleverly captured the word *federalist*, forcing his opposition to be cast as antifederalist. This was an extraordinary coup, since the term *federalist* was a popular word but not yet a coherent notion. Hamilton had learned from the more agile Madison how to seize the political high ground. Even though the Constitutional Convention was not fully in line with Hamilton’s ideals of greater centralization, he knew that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good.

Thus to ensure ratification, the unlikely team of Hamilton and Madison, along with John Jay, launched a massive public relations campaign under the pseudonym “Publius.” Madison, who was to become one of the most passionate Jeffersonians of all time, and Hamilton, who was surely the most ardent federalist of the period, came together in the *Federalist Papers* to argue for a strong constitutional government. While arguing for national unity, Madison, in *Federalist* No. 51, also recognized the importance of diverse interests. “It is of great importance in a republic . . . to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part,” he wrote, for “different interests necessarily exist.” It was Madison more than anyone else who consistently demonstrated his exceptional ability to pull together “different interests” into a working whole. “He was so obviously gentle,” writes historian Joseph Ellis, “and so eager to give credit to others, especially his opponents.”

Madison’s creed was humility with passion, civility with devotion, and tolerance with commitment. It is appropriate that we should call him the “father of our Constitution”—the document that represents the fruits of enlightened compromise. It is interesting that in this act of civility, each author tried to blur his individual authorship by sharing the *nom de plume* Publius, an example so different from the constant search for “celebrity” in the politics of today.

At the conclusion of the Convention, Benjamin Franklin, by then an elder statesman of eighty-one, rose to give his blessing to the new document. Franklin conceded that the Constitution was not perfect but a compromise document created by fallible men. Then he called for ratification:

“On the whole, Sir, I can not help expressing a Wish that every Member of the Convention, who may still have Objections to it, would, with me, on this Occasion doubt a little of his own Infallibility, and, to make *manifest* our *unanimity*, put his Name to this Instrument.”

This, then, was Franklin’s definition of civility—the ability to doubt one’s own infallibility. And therein lies the lesson of the Constitutional Convention: no human or human creation possesses “all truth,” but by melding the passions of fallible men, something of great worth can emerge.

In retrospect, and indeed in the high courts of the land, the Constitution has become “sacred scripture.” At the time, all participants in the Convention had conceded on certain cherished beliefs and felt therefore that the Constitution was imperfect but the best that they could do. However, two stubborn Virginia men, eminent in their own right, Richard Henry Lee and George Mason, eloquently noted the omission of the provisions of the Bill of Rights and refused to lend their signatures. Jefferson criticized the document from Paris. All were uncomfortable with the issue of slavery, which defied the Declaration of Independence’s statement that “all men are created equal.” But the genius of the American experiment is that the Constitution was composed and ratified with the understanding that it was merely a foundation on which to build, and in time, the “miracle at Philadelphia” became admired around the world.

First Presidents

The mutual sacrifices of opinion.

—Thomas Jefferson

The great success at Philadelphia was made possible by the character of George Washington, a leader of impeccable integrity who felt that private and public virtue should be the same. The inner life of the mind and the outer life of service were, in him, in total harmony. The “father of our country” became revered as the great servant-leader who did not seek power or reward, but it was not always so. As a cocky lieutenant colonel in the colonial forces during the French and Indian War, he constantly argued with the royal governor about his pay. When his small command was surprised and forced to surrender, he was written up in the *London Times* as a disgrace to His Majesty’s service. Then Washington experienced a transformation. Fighting under General Braddock, he survived a shower of bullets and emerged changed, believing that he was under the miraculous care of Providence. The once-cocky colonel refused a salary as commander of the Continental Army. After the war, he rejected the proposal

of disillusioned officers and men who summoned him to become a new American king.

No wonder, then, that Article II of the Constitution, which outlines the role of the executive, was written with this revolutionary icon in mind. His characteristic reluctance to rule exemplified servant-leadership, and Washington was elected our first president in 1789.

His very inclusive first cabinet brought together nearly all of the patriotic personalities that had played pivotal role in the revolutionary period: John Adams as vice-president, Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state, and Alexander Hamilton as secretary of the treasury. James Madison was the vocal leader in Congress who initially supported Washington but soured on the president's agenda when it included Hamilton's ambitious financial plans. Madison then began his defection to the Republican Party that would come to be synonymous with Thomas Jefferson. For all Washington's accomplishments as America's first president, forming a functioning government from such diverse personalities must have been one of his greatest achievements.

Washington sought the counsel of men whom he considered more brilliant than himself and stayed "so far above the battle that he often saw everything more clearly," according to historian Joseph Ellis. He did this while letting the genius of Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, and others meld to create precedent-setting public policy. Washington gave both Hamilton and Madison a chance at drafting his famous farewell address, "just as he struggled to allow the opposing geniuses of Hamilton and Jefferson to operate in his cabinet, under his reconciling eye."

Washington captured the importance of collaboration in his farewell address by warning that the spirit of partisanship would make "public administration the mirror of the ill-conceived and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans, digested by the common counsels, and modified by mutual interests." He encouraged Americans to see their "immediate and particular interest in union" where all would find "greater strength, greater resource, [and] proportionately greater security from external dangers."

The party tensions that had begun in the early days of Washington's first term escalated throughout his presidency as relations between Hamilton and Jefferson—and between the Federalists and the growing Republican opposition—became more strained. The rift began after another great American compromise was brokered. In his staunch advocacy of the assumption of the states' debts and the creation of a national bank, Alexander Hamilton tightened the ranks of the Federalist Party. Hamil-

ton begged Jefferson to give his support to the assumption legislation that was before Congress, but Jefferson opposed the broad constitutional interpretation that would have permitted the national bank's existence and worried that the southern states would receive unfair compensation for federal bonds bought by northern speculators. In one of the great moments of civility in our history, Jefferson requested a dinner meeting with Hamilton and Madison. "I thought it impossible," he wrote, "that reasonable men, consulting together coolly, could fail, by some mutual sacrifices of opinion to form a compromise which was to save the union."

He was right. The men agreed to change certain votes so that Hamilton's measure would pass. As a consolation to the southern states, it was agreed that the permanent capital of the United States would be located in the South—along the Potomac in what would become the District of Columbia. The "mutual sacrifices of opinion" made by deeply committed leaders held George Washington's administration together at a time when the Federalists and the Republicans seemed to be embarking on irreconcilable paths.

Adams succeeded Washington as president in 1796. Fresh on the heels of Washington's farewell warnings against the dangers of party, a great rash of incivility polarized not only the government but the nation as a whole. Bernard Bailyn describes an environment in which basic courtesies had been abandoned: "Every aspect of American life—business groups, banks, dance assemblies, even funerals—became politicized. People who had known each other their whole lives now crossed streets to avoid meeting. As personal and social ties fell apart, differences easily spilled into violence, and fighting broke out in the state legislatures and even in Congress."

War with France was imminent, and internal dissent, according to the British ambassador, had the "whole system of American Government tottering to its foundations." The Adams administration was in many ways doomed from the outset. Still, despite his unflattering portrayal in history books as pompous and vain, Adams, a man of enormous intellect and strong commitment, showed himself capable of reaching across party lines and personal convictions. He steered the nation through troubled waters in the "quasi-war" with France, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and the XYZ affair. In 1799, Adams sent a second peace envoy to France and kept America out of what would have inevitably been a devastating and divisive war with France.

Following these years of incivility, by 1801 the new president, Thomas Jefferson, was able to speak for unity in his inaugural address: "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by

different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans—we are all federalists.” Joseph Ellis writes that his inaugural address “signaled that the bitter party battles of the 1790s would not continue, . . . that the incoming Republicans would not seek revenge for past Federalist atrocities, . . . and, most significant, that Jefferson’s understanding of ‘pure republicanism’ did not mean a radical break with Federalist policies or a dramatic repudiation of the governmental framework established in the Constitution.”

Many Americans are inclined to look back on the founding generation and its Age of Passion with deserved reverence. But though they are revered today as miracle workers, their powers, as Madison reminds us, were the powers of men, not angels. Their gifts were also plenty and diverse. As the greatest and most productive generation in our history, and perhaps in world history, we must learn from the examples of these men—their ability to hold ideals so strongly and to maintain their convictions while still listening to opposition and making allowances for human failings and compromise.

A House Divided

“Bleeding Kansas” placed sectional animosities on grim display.

—Gary Gallagher

By the time Jefferson left office in 1808, the man who had opposed nationalism had nearly doubled the size of the country. From thirteen original coastal colonies, America was rapidly expanding westward as streams of settlers sought new opportunities in the territories. But the territories would also provide the catalyst, and in many cases the battlegrounds, for the greatest era of incivility that the country had yet known. Unfortunately, for all their insight and brilliance, the founding fathers had been silent on one divisive issue: slavery. It was what Joseph Ellis calls “the tragic and perhaps intractable problem that even the revolutionary generation, with all its extraordinary talent, could neither solve nor face.” This problem served as a warning to our nation of the dangers of intolerance and incivility.

History suggests that drifting so far apart can only produce calamity. To mollify the South in the midst of growing sectional tensions, the Compromise of 1850 contained a provision to toughen the Fugitive Slave Law, which mandated the return of any slave, whether found in a free or a slave

state, to his or her original master. Enraged by the law, Harriet Beecher Stowe penned *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a fictional narrative criticizing slavery that quickly became a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Southerners reacted with equal rage, banning the book and trying desperately to offer a proslavery response. The slavery debate was becoming a central dimension of the sectional tensions that threatened to split the Union.

Political divisions followed, especially after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which guaranteed popular sovereignty to the territories to decide the slavery issue for themselves. The Whig Party fell to pieces, and the Republican Party emerged as the primary rival to the Democrats by 1856. That year, three major candidates ran in the sectionally charged election, which pitted the proslavery Democrat James Buchanan against the antislavery Republican John Fremont and against Millard Fillmore, the proslavery "Know-Nothing." Buchanan won by carrying all but one slave state while Fremont carried much of the North.

These political rifts widened, particularly when the situation in Kansas slid from disagreement to distrust to violence. As the historian Gary Gallagher writes, "Bleeding Kansas" placed sectional animosities on grim display." Violence between proslavery and antislavery factions in Kansas also marked a collapse of civility that would escalate to civil war.

In one glaring example of the utter disintegration of mutual respect and tolerance among public officials, a proslavery southerner, Preston Brooks, brutally caned Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate because Sumner had delivered a speech critical of the proslavery movement in Kansas. Now the blood was literal, and the Republicans took up the slogan "Bleeding Kansas and Bleeding Sumner" to remind the public of the offense.

Political divisions did not mark the extent of the bleeding, however. The slavery debate played out even in churches—the longtime mediating institutions in American life. Across the country, churches were scrambling to find a moral high ground amid a flood of political and sectional controversy. The Methodist church held a firm antislavery stance until 1844, when the Methodist Episcopal Church of the South split off to adopt the defense of slavery as a positive good. The Baptists divided a year later after the church convention refused to appoint slaveholding missionaries, and although the Presbyterians avoided a formal division, the church suffered sectional divisions that produced an "Old School" proslavery faction and a "New School" antislavery faction. Differences in the churches quickly became irreconcilable as opponents ascribed the worst possible motives to one another.

Along with the collapse of the Whig Party and its roots in both the North and South went its great compromiser, Henry Clay. The violence and divisions accelerated as reciprocity and trust vanished. Something had to be done to stop the bleeding; the unfinished work of the founders could no longer be ignored.

Rebirth of Freedom

We are not enemies, but friends.

—Abraham Lincoln

By 1858, the new Republican prairie lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, knew that the time to end the divisions had come:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.

These words introduced to the country his “antislavery ideology that combined fixed purpose with a respect for constitutional restraints,” an ideology that won him the presidency in the election of 1860.

When Lincoln rose to deliver his first inaugural address in 1861, South Carolina had repealed its ratification of the Constitution of the United States and seceded from the Union. The other southern states were soon to follow. Still, Lincoln preached reconciliation. To the last, he believed that war could be avoided if only all could remember their common “bonds of affection.” He said, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though *passion* may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Lincoln knew that the sectional controversies of the previous decade did not represent the true American identity. He committed his presidency

to winning the “second American Revolution” by which he sought to restore to the country its mediating ethics of tolerance and civility—its “better angels.” To accomplish this goal, though, the very shrewd Lincoln also knew he had to move slowly, showing the southern states tolerance with commitment to return them to the federal government. Thus as evidenced in his first inaugural address, Lincoln made the preservation of the Union, not the abolition of slavery, his war goal.

His seemingly hypocritical move away from his “house divided” speech, in which he forecast the “ultimate extinction” of slavery, showed Lincoln’s deft timing and practicality. It was a tactical concession to maintain unity of effort, without which Lincoln knew he could not win the coming war. He had to hold the border states, where many citizens kept slaves, and maintain loyalties among the Democrats, who were willing to fight a war to maintain the Union but not for abolition in the North. Although Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists pilloried Lincoln as a moral relativist, it was thanks to Lincoln’s calculation that abolition ultimately came. The president proved willing “to temper firmness with restraint” so that his other goals might, in time, be realized. He had that extraordinary leadership ability to set a clear goal but also the insight to know that the best path is not always the shortest.

Before long, though, Lincoln knew the time for America’s second revolution was at hand. Thus when Lincoln realized that his plan for gradual and compensated emancipation in the border states was not likely to materialize, he made a bold move. After the modest and bloody Union victory at Antietam in 1862, Lincoln moved forward to prepare his immortal Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that slaves “within any State . . . in rebellion against the United States shall be . . . thence forward, and forever free.” “Although restoration of the Union remained his first priority,” writes the historian James McPherson, “the abolition of slavery became an end as well as a means, a war aim virtually inseparable from union itself.”

He had brilliantly struck a critical blow against the South: this provided the Union with an additional 180,000 black troops and gave the North the moral high ground from which to secure European sympathies. As both a war strategist and a political leader, Lincoln was unsurpassed in American history. On the moral level, it was only after witnessing their gallant fighting that he recognized African Americans as fully his equal. The decisive stroke of his proclamation also allowed Lincoln to make an important redefinition of the cause for which so many had already given their “last full measure of devotion.” As one studies presidents as war

leaders, or military strategy in general, timing is everything, and Lincoln's was simply brilliant.

With his Gettysburg speech in November 1863, Lincoln went from being a "transactional leader," who had until then carefully managed the national crisis, to a "transformational leader," who would envision and bring about for America "a new birth of freedom." Realizing the founding vision of a "nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," he was in the process of completing his revolution.

By 1864, weary of war, many northerners were inclined to support the Democratic Party, led by the good-looking General George McClellan, who promised a negotiated peace settlement even if that settlement meant southern independence. For Lincoln, this was unacceptable, as it would compromise his first goal of preserving the Union. Suddenly buoyed by Sherman's decisive victory in Atlanta and other northern victories that summer and fall, Lincoln, to his surprise, easily won reelection.

Even while remaining committed to a total offensive against the South that would cost thousands of lives, Lincoln preached reconciliation and civility. Before the victory of the North was assured, Lincoln rose in his second inaugural address, as the sun suddenly broke through the clouds, to call famously for "malice toward none" and "charity for all." Far from a moral relativist, he balanced this call for civility with an equally emphatic call to maintain "*firmness* in the right as God gives us to see the right."

And as at so many other crucial points in the American experience, it took faith to negotiate this passage. Unlike President McKinley, who felt that he had received direct authorization from God to go to war with Spain and take the Philippines, Lincoln never assumed that he was in lock-step with God or that the Almighty directed all that he did. Rather, Lincoln was a constant inquirer and keenly aware of his own fallibility. He noted that both sides read the same Bible and that the prayers of both would not be answered fully, for God had his own purposes. Lincoln never claimed to speak for God. He used the conditional throughout his speech: "If God wills that . . ." After his second inaugural address, the president's former critic Frederick Douglass told Lincoln, "That was a sacred effort." Douglass was referring to the speech, but he could just as easily have been referring to Lincoln's transformational leadership over the preceding five years. Sacred indeed. Ironically, the savior of the Union was slain on Good Friday in 1865, some said to atone for the sins of both the North and the South.

The Best Laid Plans

He serves his party best who serves his country best.

—Rutherford B. Hayes

Lincoln's tragic death dashed any hope of a smooth national reunion. In the later years of the Civil War, the Great Emancipator had advocated a plan that would have allowed the rebel states to rejoin the Union with minimal repercussions. The so-called "ten percent plan" stipulated that as soon as ten percent of the voting population of a state swore an oath of loyalty to the Union, that state would be free to set up a loyal government and be readmitted. Radical Republicans in Congress resented this approach as overly generous and sought instead a fifty percent loyalty requirement and increased power given to the federal courts to enforce emancipation. Congress passed these plans in the Wade-Davis Bill of July 1864. Not wanting to prematurely commit to any one plan for reconstruction, Lincoln exercised a pocket veto of the bill. Tragically, he was slain before he could clarify his intentions for reconstruction.

Lincoln's successor, the Southern Unionist from Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, wanted every state to pledge an oath of allegiance. He also urged southern states to declare secession illegal, repudiate the Confederate debt, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. The former rebel states did this begrudgingly, intentionally writing loopholes into their new constitutions to keep rights, particularly voting rights, from blacks. Southern state legislatures enacted the "black codes," which placed further restrictions on the freedoms of former slaves. Congressional Republicans also resented the election of several prominent ex-Confederate leaders to Congress in 1865 and decided to take the reconstruction agenda away from Johnson. After Johnson subsequently—and stubbornly—vetoed two relatively modest Republican bills, moderate Republicans in Congress joined their more radical brethren in opposition to the president.

Proud and intolerant of opposition, Johnson refused to reconcile with his party and took to the stump in his infamous "swing around the circle campaign" of 1868. He argued against the majority of Republicans and campaigned for his own newly created National Union movement. The campaign, along with Johnson's opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment, further alienated Congress and the public, and the election gave Republicans two-thirds of the seats in both houses of Congress. Thus Congress was in a position to begin its own harsh reconstruction program.

Johnson began dismissing members of his administration who supported Radical Reconstruction. An equally uncivil Congress responded with a number of measures meant to curb the president's power to hire and fire employees, and before long, they snared Johnson in a violation of the new laws. Sensing their opportunity to remove an obstacle, the House impeached the president. He was acquitted by a single vote in the Senate. Johnson's lack of civility and intolerance drove people to extremes, polarized the country, and nearly cost him the presidency. This was a low point in American history.

In 1876, shortly after the nation celebrated its centennial, the struggle of Reconstruction had officially ended, but the disputed election of Hayes and Tilden in November was threatening to become violent. It was much worse than the disputed election of 1800, for some governors began to mobilize militia. Congress set up a special commission to determine how to award the electoral votes from four states (three still under federal military control), and a political deal was struck. Candidate Hayes received the disputed votes, no doubt as a result of a deal whereby a Democratic senator, David Key, and a former Confederate colonel would come into the Republican Hayes's cabinet. Union troops would be withdrawn from the occupied southern states, and southwestern railways would receive subsidies. President Hayes spent his four years in office trying to rebuild the civility of the nation and bringing the North and South together again. His motto was "He serves his party best who serves his country best."

The America that emerged in the decades following the Civil War was an industrial giant, a rising global power, and a nation of ever more immigrants. Many new arrivals fled not only poverty but also religious intolerance. This was the era during which the Statue of Liberty, a centennial gift from the people of France, erected in 1886, took on its global significance as the protector of the downtrodden, the weak, the huddled masses who could not find education, material wealth, or political power in their native lands.

A new generation of leaders emerged to guide America into this new world. The most notable was the adventurous "Rough Rider" Theodore Roosevelt, called the accidental president. He led the Progressive movement, became the first environmental president, busted trusts, and turned the United States into a great power. In global affairs, he carried "a big stick" but "spoke softly" and even negotiated a peace treaty between warring Russia and Japan for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize. The warrior turned diplomat.

The Beginning of an Age

It was a case of too much too late.

—John Cooper, on President Wilson’s outreach
to ratify the treaty of Versailles

The next important chapter in American history was written by President Woodrow Wilson, who ran for a second term in 1916. Though he campaigned on a ticket to keep the United States out of the European “Great War” then raging, in 1917, he led America to intervene in that conflict. Suddenly, dramatically different people and cultures had a more immediate impact on American affairs, and tolerance became an even more important virtue, as did American commitment to the republican principles of liberty and the rule of law. Despite rising discrimination at home against German Americans, the enemy in Europe, Wilson, the scholar and idealist, recognized our responsibility not just to the nation but to the world. “We are at the beginning of an age,” he said, “in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among individual citizens of the civilized states.”

Wilson, the former head of Princeton University, developed perhaps the most extensive international reconstruction plan ever created and the grandest postwar vision of “making the world safe for democracy” in his proposal known as the Fourteen Points. Wilson, like Lincoln, had vision. Unlike Lincoln, he was ineffective at blazing a pathway to achieve that vision. His lack of civility, practicality, and inclusiveness produced what John Cooper calls “perhaps the greatest presidential failure in the politics of foreign policy.” It is instructive, then, to discuss the rise and fall of the Fourteen Points.

At war’s end, Wilson, the moralist, hoped to lead the Paris Peace Conference to adopt a new world system that would prevent the eruption of war by removing its impetus. The keystone of his plan was the creation of a League of Nations to mediate between its member states. Even before the conclusion of the war, there was general public support for such a league, but Wilson made few attempts before the Paris conference to extend the base of support for the issue beyond his own party. Because of personal animosity, Wilson did not invite a key Republican, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, to be a part of the discussions. He also failed to include a single Republican in the peace delegation—neither former President Taft nor former Secretary of State Elihu Root nor his former presidential

opponent Charles Evans Hughes. Thus when he returned from Europe and undertook a whirlwind campaign to convince the American public to embrace the League, it “was a case of too much too late.” Finally, it was Wilson’s refusal to entertain compromise with the Senate or court the necessary coalitions that would not just weaken but actually destroy the viability of his Fourteen Points.

Like Wilson, many American presidents have failed not at creating a vision but at implementing it. In our system, compromise, inclusion, and some tolerance of dissenting views are essential to developing a practical pathway to success. The lesson to be taken from Wilson’s failure might have special significance for President George W. Bush as he tries to implement his vision for postwar Iraq and democracy in the Middle East.

The miracle of the Constitutional Convention and of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency is that the leadership qualities of civility and commitment, coalition building, and inclusiveness coincided at precisely the right moments. Tragically for America and for the world, there was no such miracle after World War I. Indeed, a strong League of Nations with the United States as its leading member would have involved us directly in the international crises of the 1930s. Hitler might have been stopped early on. An American leadership presence in Europe might have deterred his rise in the first place.

The New Deal: “Dr. Win the War”

In a play on his initials, F. D., fellow students at Harvard called this handsome, young patrician a “feather duster”—a lightweight. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was nonetheless appointed assistant secretary of the navy during World War I, following in the footsteps of his cousin, former president Teddy. All expected he might become an important political figure one day, but in 1921, Roosevelt was suddenly cut down by polio. His son James referred to him as the father with the dead legs. Roosevelt’s protective and domineering mother wanted him to retire to Hyde Park. Instead, with the support of his estranged wife, Roosevelt transformed himself into a towering leader who could overcome all odds. He would later say to the nation, “All we have to fear is fear itself.” He led us out of the Great Depression and later to victory in World War II.

Unlike Wilson, Roosevelt had both the bold vision and the practical ability to experiment, change course, and build coalitions. Notes James MacGregor Burns, “FDR entered office without a set program or even a definite philosophy of government. Roosevelt said that he was perfectly aware that he might have to try first one thing and then another—the

pragmatic implication was that ‘what works’ would be the decisive question, although it was not always clear what worked.” Elected first in 1932 during the high tide of the Great Depression, Roosevelt knew he faced nearly impossible odds but spoke as a truly great communicator with compassion and hope.

In his first term, he assembled a “brain trust” to advise his presidency. Having won all but fifty-nine electoral votes, Roosevelt built a remarkable coalition to launch the most expansive legislative initiative ever undertaken. His “first hundred days” saw the passage of fifteen major bills that covered multiple facets of the Depression crisis.

His dramatic achievements in these turbulent times were a testament to his moderation and flexibility. By installing a social safety net in the form of the New Deal, Roosevelt rescued the free enterprise system from a crisis. While he was attacked from the right for his liberal social policies, the onslaught from the left was even more severe as charismatic figures like Governor Huey Long and Father Coughlin argued for what amounted to American socialism. Roosevelt’s deft compromises with these competing ideologies kept America from going socialist, as many European nations did.

Roosevelt was far ahead of the nation in recognizing the threat from Hitler and personally pursued both covert and overt efforts to aid the British. Even before Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt formed a unity war cabinet by appointing two experienced Republicans, Stimson and Knox, to head the War and Navy Departments. He enlisted the help of the scientist-engineer and head of the Carnegie Institute, Vannevar Bush, to mobilize the university scientific research community behind the war effort. He also used Wendell Wilkie, his presidential opponent in the election of 1940, as a messenger to Winston Churchill. In his own words, FDR had moved from “Dr. New Deal,” the partisan, to “Dr. Win the War,” the nonpartisan. Roosevelt’s war leadership also showed his superb balance of commitment and tolerance to unite with Republican business leaders to accomplish the nearly impossible. Roosevelt did not always agree with them, but he joined forces with them to win the war.

Like Washington and Lincoln, Roosevelt believed in a divine design that had taken care of a cripple like him. He respected the mysteries of that design and never pretended to have a direct line to heaven. Unlike Lincoln, he was a conventional Episcopalian who believed, almost playfully, that the Lord would occasionally make small things happen to encourage him onward.

Roosevelt’s wartime example of inclusion extended into the Cold War through the successive administrations of Harry Truman and Dwight

Eisenhower. These practical presidents maintained working relations with Congress and the opposing party as they faced the new challenge of the Cold War. Despite his domestic fights with Congress as “Give-’em-Hell Harry,” his 1948 campaign against what he called a “do-nothing Republican Congress,” and his courageous drive for civil rights legislation while facing an election campaign, Harry Truman, the domestic partisan, was a master of civility and inclusion on the foreign policy front.

The Marshall Plan

We are the first great nation to feed and support the conquered.

—Harry S Truman

The Marshall Plan was the greatest success of the Truman administration. It was a post-World War II European reconstruction plan as bold as Wilson’s ill-fated Fourteen Points but far more successful.

The first reason for success was Truman himself. Like Washington, this plainspoken man from Missouri surrounded himself with eminent advisers. Truman admired his secretary of state, George Marshall, more than he did Churchill and Roosevelt due to Marshall’s role as the organizer of victory in World War II but even more because Marshall was totally selfless, a listener rather than a talker. These were qualities needed to woo the Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg and other members of Congress, including the Taft isolationists. Truman knew that Marshall would solicit and incorporate Vandenberg’s views on the plans, formulation, and implementation of European reconstruction. This \$12 billion dollar program, which came to be known as the Marshall Plan, won bipartisan approval.

A few days after the plan passed, Truman wrote, “In all the history of the world, we are the first great nation to feed and support the conquered.” The plan emanated forgiveness, healing, and reconstruction worthy of the Puritans’ “city set on a hill.” It was a shining hour for America. Truman, Marshall, and Vanderberg were worthy of the founding fathers.

By the time Truman left the White House, the great institutions responsible for winning the Cold War were in place: the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the CIA, the Marshall Plan, and NATO. Even here, Truman resurrected Republican President Herbert Hoover to lead important commissions on better government performance.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower came to office having commanded the grand coalition of often difficult generals that won the Second World War.

His more subtle style of leadership exuded honesty, civility, and optimism. The boy from Kansas, who led the Allies to victory in Europe, was an incarnation of the American dream. He was comfortable in his own skin, especially with his quiet inner faith. He never criticized an adversary by name. He appointed members from both the internationalist and isolationist wings of his party to the cabinet and established for the first time in the American presidency a congressional liaison director, Bryce Harlow. The president acted with great deference and decorum toward Democratic leaders in Congress. When facing an international crisis, he believed in first going to the Hill, knowing that unity added to presidential success at home and abroad.

The early period of the Eisenhower era was marred only by the opportunistic scare mongering of the uncivil Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose investigation of and public hearings on suspected Communists in government became indiscriminate and mean. During one dramatic hearing, the secretary of the army asked McCarthy, "Sir, have you no decency?" The Senate agreed in its resolution to censure the senator.

Eisenhower skillfully changed course from the liberalism of Roosevelt and Truman without upsetting the system they created, including some New Deal and Fair Deal programs. He championed the monumental national highway legislation that transformed the country and laid infrastructure for the greatest expansion of wealth seen in our history. Like George Washington, he tried to be a mediator rather than party leader or chief legislator. For all the conservative rhetoric, Eisenhower was truly a practical leader, and his great organizational skills equipped the White House with a national security process to better manage the ensuing forty years of Cold War. A true grand strategist, he created the United States Information Agency to explain the best of America and thereby win the battle of ideas and perceptions. He created the science advisory system to maintain scientific superiority. He was inclusive in his outreach for professional talent.

Young and charismatic John F. Kennedy came into office with inspirational rhetoric that mobilized the country's idealism and united the nation and many peoples longing for freedom everywhere with the challenge, "My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America can do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man." An inclusive Kennedy enlisted a prominent, highly respected Republican secretary of the treasury in Douglas Dillon, who stimulated investment with tax cuts. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, for which Kennedy publicly and immediately accepted responsibility, the president brought in a second highly respected

Republican, John McCone, as head of the CIA. He soon announced that America would go to the moon. The peak of his career was the careful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Throughout his brief presidency, Kennedy came through as a man of civility, as a uniter, not a divider of the nation. He inspired the youth of our country to public service.

The Vietnam War: The Great Divide

Unfortunately, the principles of civility, bipartisanship, inclusion, and unity of purpose that Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy had championed to lead America in the immediate post-World War II period would not last. Increasing support in America for the “containment” of communism worldwide led President Kennedy in the early 1960s to commit U.S. aid and advisers to the South Vietnamese in their struggle against the Communist north. Later, under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s influence, Lyndon Johnson committed more ground troops in an Americanization of the war. Lacking clarity of purpose and an effective strategy, U.S. operations became bogged down in the quagmire of South Vietnam. In stark contrast to the incredible national unity that won World War II, the Vietnam War sundered America. Some sons of the rich obtained college deferments from the draft, while the poor went to fight. Antiwar sentiment mushroomed, and across the country, angry citizens jeered, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” The unexpected 1968 Tet Offensive—a spate of coordinated surprise attacks on U.S. bases and the Saigon Embassy—had minimal military repercussions but delivered a bruising blow to public opinion on the American home front.

Johnson saw the harm the war was causing, both at home and abroad, and shockingly declared that he would not stand for reelection so that he could devote his full energy to a negotiated settlement. This story of Johnson and Vietnam is truly a presidential tragedy. LBJ was an extraordinarily successful domestic president who effectively built coalitions in areas such as civil rights. It remains a mystery why he could not better apply these skills to Vietnam.

In 1968, the new president, Richard Nixon, brilliant, shrewd, and insecure, recognized the disastrous nature of the Vietnam conflict and pursued a policy of détente with the Soviet Union. In a series of masterstrokes, Nixon hoped to end the Cold War with the Soviets, open China, and “Vietnamize” the war. But well into his first term as president, the conflict raged on, and with his failure of character in dealing with the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, Nixon ruined his

chances at successful leadership. The nation suffered both from the tragic end of the war and the near impeachment and resignation of a sitting president.

A man of great civility as Republican leader in the House, President Gerald Ford did much to use his two-year tenure to heal the nation. He was hindered by his courageous but controversial pardon of Nixon. He said that he wished only to spare the nation the sight of a protracted trial.

In this period of both domestic and international suffering, another transformational leader emerged, not in the halls of government but in the pulpit. For the nation at large, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a transformational figure throughout the 1960s. More important, he embodied the kind of committed yet tolerant leadership consistent with the founding of our Republic. Speaking in biblical tones not heard since Lincoln, King called on America to “live out the true meaning of its creed” that “all men are created equal.” King’s uniting vision gave millions of Americans genuine hope in the American dream. He believed that people should be judged “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” King, following on the model of Mahatma Gandhi in India, advocated principled nonviolence in pursuing his goal. This was especially important as the incivility and violence escalated in both the civil rights and antiwar movements. King encouraged his followers, including Vietnam War protesters, to show civility and restraint in the face of extreme mistreatment. Much as Roosevelt warded off socialism at a moment that transformed our political culture, King warded off violence in a nation divided. He called the nation to find common ground.

Civility on the International Stage: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush

Our next three presidents—Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Herbert Walker Bush—were very different. Each had striking international successes that were achieved only through exemplary civility. These successes were due to their common styles in manifesting civility in their negotiations and coalition building.

Though Jimmy Carter was a man of character, devoted to human rights worldwide, he lacked the visionary skills and charisma of Kennedy. His presidency was marred by double-digit inflation and the Iranian hostage crises. His defining moment, however, was at Camp David, where through unusual skills of civility and careful handling of negotiation details, he brought together President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister

Menachem Begin of Israel to agree to a remarkable Middle East settlement. After his single term, Carter continued such reconciliation work by building his presidential center into an institution in Atlanta that mediates conflicts worldwide with a keen understanding of compromise and civility. He appropriately received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Ronald Reagan, the Great Communicator, rode into office on a landslide victory, increased military spending and created large budget deficits, launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, and branded the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” When Michael Gorbachev came to lead that nation, Reagan, ever the Cold Warrior, recognized an opportunity to make a U-turn toward engagement, dialogue, and negotiation, especially in view of the weakened Soviet economy. In 1985, the leaders of the world’s two superpowers met in Geneva, where mutual fascination and deep discussions on how to move forward proceeded in civil exchange. Before his advisers, Reagan saw the opportunity to work with a man he liked on a new course of disarmament between the two superpowers. Together he hoped they could bring to an end the “overnuclearized” strategy, which Reagan loathed.

In the autumn of 1986 in Reykjavik, Iceland, the two leaders came together in intensive armament negotiations in which Gorbachev demonstrated startling flexibility. Then Gorbachev suddenly declared his concessions contingent on Reagan’s shelving the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the meeting broke apart. Contrary to the public alarm at this time, Gorbachev later wrote that this was the decisive turning point of the Cold War. The following year, Reagan and Gorbachev reached a dramatic agreement that for the first time eliminated an entire class of intermediate-range nuclear missiles worldwide and included serious negotiations toward reducing all long-range nuclear missiles by half. The end of the Cold War was in sight. The two leaders truly connected in what Gorbachev has since called “a miracle.”

Reagan’s successor, the experienced George H. W. Bush, called for a kinder, gentler America, but he lacked the Gipper’s magic touch. When Iraq’s Saddam Hussein suddenly invaded Kuwait, however, Bush swiftly and masterfully built an international coalition. He conducted personal consultations with leaders of many countries, including even radical Syria, and carefully laid out a unified military strategy and burden-sharing with coalition partners, who assumed over eighty percent of the cost of the ensuing brilliant military victory. The entire effort is a case study in civility: two-way discussions with partners and allies to move to higher ground in an extraordinary unity of effort.

The Current Challenge

Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment.

—George W. Bush

Democrat Bill Clinton's popular two-term presidency was politically charged: he took over some Republican programs and wrapped them in compassion, believing he had to govern from the political center to meet the great economic challenges we faced. America enjoyed great prosperity during his presidency. Clinton had an uncanny ability to identify with individuals and to "feel their pain." He and the newly elected midterm speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, leader of the 1994 Republican electoral revolution, formed a pact with a handshake. They later opposed one another over the shutdown of the federal government due to Congress's failure to provide funding, a confrontation that boomeranged against the Republicans and set the stage for Clinton's political revitalization. However, the president's sordid affair with an aide, Monica Lewinsky, the attempted cover-up, and his ensuing impeachment resulted in the first trial of a sitting president since Andrew Johnson. Open hostility in Congress plunged the country into partisan divisions. The resulting incivility and polarization have stayed with us to this day.

Indeed, the congressional actions on the impeachment and trial of Bill Clinton are an example of the harm that can be done by incivility and partisanship within Congress. Unlike the bipartisan congressional handling of the Nixon-era Watergate affair and the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra scandal, the 1998–1999 Clinton episode is far more reminiscent of the political civil war between Andrew Johnson and the radical Republicans. In Congress, Senator Dianne Feinstein offered a constructive way out of the controversy with a resolution stating that President Clinton "gave false and misleading testimony and his actions have had the effect of impeding discovery of evidence of Judicial Proceedings." This resolution drew seventy-nine senators into bipartisan support but was blocked by Republicans who wanted a conviction they could not obtain. A civil bipartisan outcome to heal the wound was out of reach, and America was once again so split and Congress so polarized that by the turn of this century, redistricting hardened the battle lines into red and blue states. The loss of a middle ground often left Congress dysfunctional or merely passive. In 2000, divisions were exacerbated by the third disputed election in our history, this one going to the U.S. Supreme Court for resolution.

George W. Bush, a self-labeled “compassionate conservative,” had campaigned on the platform that he would bring the country together, as he had done with his state as governor of Texas. He lost the popular vote but came to office, proclaiming civility, after the Supreme Court awarded him Florida’s electoral college votes. Review the call for civility in his inaugural:

America, at its best, matches a commitment to principle with a concern for civility. A civil society demands from each of us good will and respect, fair dealing and forgiveness. Some seem to believe that our politics can afford to be petty because in a time of peace, the status of our debates appear small. But the stakes for America are never smaller. We must live up to the calling we share. Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos. And this commitment, if we keep it, is a way to shared accomplishment.

From the start, George Bush led boldly, as if backed by a majority mandate. He pressed forward with deep tax cuts and then joined with Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy on a bipartisan education bill under the mantra “leave no child behind.” In a gracious act, Bush named the Department of Justice building after Robert F. Kennedy, the former attorney general and brother of the former president.

When the September 11 terrorists struck in 2001, President Bush led the nation with courage and wisdom as an inspiring war leader. As noted earlier, his presence at the Twin Towers site, at the Islamic Center, and at the National Cathedral memorial service with past presidents, exemplified a national unifier. Putting together a sixty-nation coalition for the war on terror in the next four months and executing an agile attack on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, he was a model war leader and stood for these months alongside Lincoln and FDR, America’s two greatest war leaders.

But in the first months of 2002, his diplomacy became less inclusive and things got somewhat off track. The Bush administration tried to mobilize resources for a determined move against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, but damage had been done by unnecessary talk of preemption and unilateralism, despite the fact that Article 51 of the UN Charter allows for the right of such self-defense and obviously had to be reinterpreted in an age of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Under dire circumstances, our nation has always operated unilaterally, even preemptively, as in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The use of such extended rhetoric as a doctrine and talk of unilateralism only increased anti-Americanism worldwide, further strengthening the image of America as a bully rather than a wise and judicious world power. Bush's advisers, including Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, as well as the U.S. Congress, stressed the importance of going to the United Nations. Bush consulted the UN Security Council, where he received unanimous support for a resolution to disarm Saddam Hussein. France, however, threatened to veto a resolution approving military action and, in the end, the U.S., our staunch ally Great Britain, and a limited coalition moved to a full offensive without the Council's final approval. The ensuing "Operation Iraqi Freedom" culminated in Bush's declaration of military victory just a few weeks later, on May 1, 2003.

Although the war resolution received bipartisan support from Congress, the political side of Bush's postwar reconstruction strategy did not involve the kind of expert and inclusive marshaling of expertise as under FDR's postwar planning or in Truman's execution of the Marshall Plan. Hussein's tyrannical regime had been toppled, but maintaining the perception of moral superiority was complicated as an undermanned occupation force dealt with an increased insurgency, mounting casualties, and the involvement of American reservists in the Abu Ghraib scandal. Anti-Americanism soared around the world, and our relationships with long-time allies became strained. With the midsummer transfer of sovereignty to the provisional Iraqi government, the U.S. began to move away from its role as a dominant occupying force toward one as part of a larger peace-keeping mission.

In contrast to these troubling developments overseas, Homeland Security Department Secretary Tom Ridge has been dedicated to civility, outreach, and inclusion as he has organized the resources needed to fight the war on terrorism at home. Ridge created broad advisory structures to draw on a wide range of bipartisan talent from across the nation, somewhat analogous to what FDR had so brilliantly done in World War II. Of course, Secretary of State Colin Powell has been another model of civility in all of his endeavors, as is evidenced by his extraordinary public standing. With the costs of Iraq continuing to challenge us, the need for leadership demonstrating such inclusion on domestic and international fronts is clear if we are to succeed.

Mistakes have been made. But as the master strategist Napoleon said, in war it is not he who makes no mistakes but he who makes the fewest who prevails. The test is how leaders deal with their mistakes. This too has something very much to do with civility and humility, which George W.

Bush spoke so well about in his presidential campaign and his inaugural. This lesson of humility applies to whoever leads the White House and Congress in the coming years.

Spirituality as a Bridge

Surely some revelation is at hand.

—William Butler Yeats

Most of this essay has focused on the attributes of civility, on civility's roots in traditional and civil religion, and on the many expressions of civility (and incivility) during various American presidencies. It has noted that the greatest presidents have tended to be inclusive, to be uniters rather than dividers.

I want to turn, first, to the current political and social scene and raise a fundamental question about our religious nation: Are civility's religious and spiritual roots a unifying force for our country? Or, as some would argue, has religion, now so mixed with politics and the mass media, itself become a wedge issue? Second, I want to apply the historical lessons of civility to current events and to the diversity of religious beliefs in America. In doing so, I believe that we will find that even in these troubled times, civility is the vital component to our democratic form of government and must also be applied in the religious sphere between and within denominations and faiths. Indeed, civility is needed to infuse creativity and common purpose in our government and its several branches and throughout the nation.

Today, as our nation and the world confront new and great perils, the paralyzing forces of incivility and intolerance could threaten our country. Divisions in Congress reflect divisions in the country. The number of wedge issues appear endless: pro-choice, right to life, death penalty, gay marriage, stem cell research, tax cuts and raises, and now, on top of everything, the war in Iraq and the overextension of our citizen soldiers, National Guard, and reserves. As mentioned earlier, we also face long-term challenges to our nation: the deficit, the rising cost of Social Security and Medicare just as the baby boom generation enters retirement, and rampant anti-Americanism overseas, which can create more terrorists. All of these factors contribute to our domestic discord. These challenges, if allowed to divide the nation, might deny the next generation the prosperity and civic culture that we have inherited.

A house divided against itself cannot stand, intoned the biblical-sounding Lincoln. True, we have not reached the great national downslide of the

1840s and 1850s, leading to the Civil War, but today we are at “one of the low points,” the political scientist Ross Baker noted, observing the lack of civility in Congress. As the *New York Times* writer Sheryl G. Stolberg notes, Benjamin Franklin once said that “Congress should be a mirror image of the American people, and it is, in the sense that Americans are terribly divided and their elected representatives are unable to transcend those divisions.”

The words of the poet William Yeats come hauntingly to mind:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all convictions, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand.

But what is this revelation? The question still stands: Is religion in America a divisive force, or can American spirituality and the civil religion of the founders help unite the country? The central idea in this essay is that American spirituality can be a uniter, if the same principles of civility I have enumerated are also practiced by different religious groups. For we often ignore the fact that pure religion in its spiritual core involves both commitment and tolerance.

America is indeed a spiritual nation, a people whose spirituality goes well beyond the regular attendance at church, temple, and mosque. Indeed, for the mid-nineteenth-century French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville, the intense “religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on my arrival.” This tradition should be embraced, as America is increasingly a nation of many faiths, each with its own deep commitments, but interlocked in civic virtue and the need for tolerance. A uniting spirituality can keep us humble and remind us that we are but small parts of a greater plan. If civility and interfaith dialogue are practiced among religious groups, common spirituality will unite us.

Rabbi Ronald Sobel, the leader of the largest Reform Jewish congregation in America, eloquently notes that “beneath the theological differences that separate us—profound and serious—there is a far greater ‘depth theology.’ And when we penetrate beneath the surfaces of our differences, what we find is that we stand not on opposite sides of the fence but rather on the same side.”

Many faiths experience this same core spiritual revelation. Michael Novak touched on this theme in his book *On Two Wings: Humble Faith*

and Common Sense at the American Founding. His title reminds us of the connection between the inner self and outer practice that the founders took for granted, for their spirituality and their very character were mixed with a sense of the practical and respect for the individual. The best among our founders lacked arrogance and self-righteousness.

The genius of American religious culture and its relationship to our political culture is, as de Tocqueville noted, America's spiritual and practical elements express both our religious nature and our individualistic personalities. Dogmas that divide theologians, scandals in the church, and the politicization of religious issues often shrink before the individual expression of an overarching spirituality. Alan Wolfe's book *The Transformation of American Religion* captures the nexus of this relationship. Wolfe writes, "Understanding more about the ways American practice religion also helps. . . . Americans are more likely to identify with their faith, which they consider personal to them, than with institutions, including denominations and congregations, that have historically represented their faith to them." It is the revitalization of these spiritual roots of civility that we sorely need.

Crossing the Bridge

The consonance of faith and reason.

—John Witherspoon and Samuel Cooper

Whenever religion in America angrily divides us, that division violates the spirit of the world's great religions, as well as the convictions of our nation's founders. It is also against the teachings of our more thoughtful religious leaders. Inclusiveness, especially in a religious context, is not new. For instance, early in the Christian tradition, even the Apostle Paul struggled to contain the deep division in the early Jesus movement between the Jewish Christians, who demanded circumcision for all the followers, and the Gentiles, who vehemently opposed this and other Levitical requirements. Yet in his epistles to the Romans and the Ephesians, time and again Paul told each movement to support its individual belief on such matters. Do not compromise the details of your belief but "welcome all." "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another. . . . Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you." This teaching is filled with the search for civility and inclusiveness.

At a meeting of fellow evangelists, the Rev. Robert Schuller recently lamented, "What upsets me about religious leaders of all faiths is that they

talk like they know it all, and anybody who doesn't agree with them is a heretic." To take Schuller's words a step further, too often religious leaders believe—a bit arrogantly—that they have at last solved the mystery of God. Likewise, we are approaching an era of partisanship that echoes this mind-set of absolutism that can close off dialogue and mutual respect, if we are not able to reclaim our civility.

In dealing with religious differences, we must remind ourselves of the tradition set by our first president, George Washington. An Anglican, Washington conversed alike with the Jews at the synagogue at Newport, the Quakers in Pennsylvania, and the Catholics in Maryland. He epitomized the American genius of unity in diversity. This is a political unity that coalesces around common political philosophy—our religious traditions, rising from the Judeo-Christian and later incorporating other traditions, that acknowledges these “self-evident truths” to allow unity in diversity. Washington and other early American leaders were influenced by the leading preachers of their time and also by the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. It is important to recall that John Witherspoon of Princeton and Samuel Cooper at Harvard emphasized “the consonance of faith and reason” that they held together as friends from different religious traditions.

Abraham Lincoln, our most articulate and spiritual president, knew much of the Bible by heart. He was even called the “redeemer president.” Not only was he possessed of extraordinary humor, but he also had an uncanny ability to penetrate to the core of the human condition and its hypocrisies. When Lincoln was asked why he had not formally joined any church, he replied, “When any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior's condensed statement of both Law and Gospel—‘Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,’ that church I will join with all my heart and all my soul.”

Lincoln saw the love of God and people around us as fundamental. Certainly, all religions require and are enriched by creeds, liturgies, commandments, and rules, but when those crowd out Lincoln's core beliefs, they are, as the Apostle Paul laments of tongues that speak but do not love, merely “sounding brass or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13).

As we turn to present events, Lincoln's words are well heeded. Clearly, religion in America—and certainly spirituality—cannot be categorized into states or platforms because it pervades them all. In modern times, the first president to express his faith so openly was not George W. Bush but Jimmy Carter. In recent years, Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman, an

Orthodox Jew, has talked more than any other public figure about the historical and current importance of religion in the public square. Not just Republicans but almost every Democratic presidential candidate has addressed religion in his life. In Congress, congressional prayer breakfasts bring Republicans and Democrats together and probably remain the best and most unobtrusive avenue in an often partisan Congress to promote nimble dialogue and civility.

Today, our national connectivity, even as it enhances our individual beliefs, comes from getting to know and admiring people “different from ourselves,” whether in terms of politics, skin color, culture, sexual orientation, or religion. I must say that the most deeply selfless and spiritual business leader I have ever known is the one-time Buddhist monk from Kyoto, Dr. Kazuo Inamori, founder of the Kyocera Corporation. He was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy in 2003.

This brings us back to our central question: Which America will we be today—the America of one or of many? Will “things fall apart” and the center not hold, or will we see a new revelation to meet the challenges with unity of purpose? Will we “nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of the earth,” (house divided speech) the last great cause born of the unique American dream whose preservation Lincoln believed so crucial for the future of humanity? Can we reclaim the civil religion and civil unity of the founders? The answer lies at the heart of our national motto: *E pluribus unum*. We are many, but we can also be one in mighty purpose. America’s civic identity can, paradoxically, bridge the forces of commitment, difference, and tolerance.

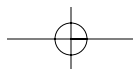
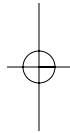
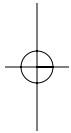
We must live this identity to its utmost if we are to engage in the respect, listening, and dialogue required to unite us and fulfill the promise of our revolutionary Constitution. On September 11, as the ashes of hate, destruction, and doubt settled across our nation, a renewed connectivity, civility and spirituality arose. Something sacred indeed happened as rescue workers, firefighters, and police insisted on going back to face almost certain death. There was the sacrifice that Stephen Carter noted in his definition of civility. So much of the world joined with us, for people of ninety-one different nationalities died in the Twin Towers that awful but now sacred day. And within days at the National Cathedral, a rabbi, a Catholic cardinal, a Protestant evangelist and a Muslim imam all spoke from the same pulpit as presidents, Republicans, and Democrats listened.

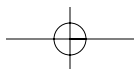
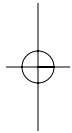
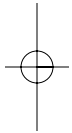
As Lincoln told the nation during its great travail, “We cannot escape history. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generations.” It is my hope that this dis-

THE GRACE AND POWER OF CIVILITY

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cussion of magnificent triumphs and deep tragedies in the American experience will help refortify the heart of civility. Such a restoration of national character is needed to move the nation toward greater tolerance, respect, and commitment. We need civility to unite the nation in order to act from a higher common ground, that we all might be one step closer to the American Dream.





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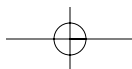
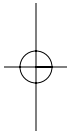
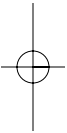
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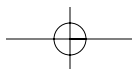
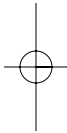
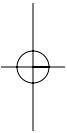
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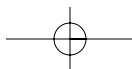
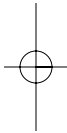
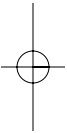


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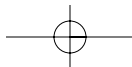
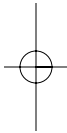
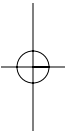
I dedicate my work to the late Rev. Joseph Durkin, S.J., Georgetown University professor of American history and my mentor in doctoral studies. I hope that he would have been pleased with this effort to recapture the American experience and would approve of my work.



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