

# Column: Nation's factions need to search for common ground

Dean Rice, Bob Clement and Howard L. Hall, Guest columnists 4:02 a.m. ET March 12, 2017



(Photo: AP)

This great nation of ours has always been one of contrasts, differing philosophies and struggles between classes, races and parties. We have always though found ways to overcome our divisions, and often our internal struggles make us stronger.

In 1958, then-U.S. Sen. John F. Kennedy said "Let us not despair but act. Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer but the right answer."

Twenty-seven years later, Republican President Ronald Reagan told the country, "Our two-party system has served us well over the years, but never better than in those times of great challenge when we came together not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans united in a common cause."

Today, the country is increasingly divided. There are those who feel the American dream has passed them by. Men and women who felt they once belonged feel abandoned, left behind. The promise of a return to a time of perceived greatness is heard and that promise genuinely inspires.

At the same time, there are those who for the first time in their lives feel that society recognizes they exist, that their lives matter, that they at long last can step from the shadows, that the American dream really does belong to them, too. To these people rhetoric telling of glorious days long past raises genuine fears.

Regardless of this divide, we all stand on the shoulders of men and women who came before us and who passed onto us our shared inheritance, this nation, and it is an inheritance that must be guarded.

At the entrance to the National Archives there is an inscription of a quote by Thomas Jefferson that reads, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." This vigilance is not only means prepared to defend against invading armies, but also to defend against self-inflicted injuries that corrode the pillars of our democracy.

There should, of course, be no illusion that the people of this diverse nation could, or even should, come to some singular agreement on all matters political. It is often precisely out of the push-and-shove of genuine debate that the best solutions to the hardest challenges are found. It is, however, important to distinguish between push-and-shove debate and slash-and-burn partisanship.

At some point the latter approach begins to destroy the ideas represented by that lady holding a torch and that flag so many have fought and died to defend. Eventually, anger and raw emotionalism focused on political foes shifts its focus and begins to destroy us as a nation.

This is not to say we should be a timid people or slow to state our case. When something that is a cornerstone of our convictions is challenged, we should respond with rigorous yet civil debate, but with ears open and fists unclenched.

Perhaps the answer lies in finding not a field of battle but a common ground, ground where we all – regardless of party affiliation or ideological bent – can meet for reasoned conversation. As Americans, we can find that place in the words that began our great story, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

At stake is an inheritance that has stood the test of birth, of civil war, of emancipation and women's suffrage, of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, of desperate civil rights struggles and two world wars, and of economic peril.

In 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt said near the conclusion of his second inaugural address to a nation struggling to rise from the Great Depression, "In every land there are always at work forces that drive men apart and forces that draw men together. In our personal ambitions we are individualists. But in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, we all go up, or else we all go down, as one people."

Coming back to a place of common ground, as one people, may not be easy, but it is not only necessary but worth the effort.

Because the alternative carries too great a price.

*Dean Rice is a global security fellow at the Institute for Nuclear Security of the University of Tennessee and chief of staff to Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett. Bob Clement is a former congressman and author of "Presidents, Kings, & Convicts: My Journey from the Tennessee Governor's Residence to the Halls of Congress." Howard L. Hall is director of the Global Security Program at UT's Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy.*

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