

What It Means to Be an American

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We are citizens of an exceptional nation. We will be so fortunate as long as we accept what it means to be an American.

Each of us as an American has these obligations:

- affirm Constitutional government
- accept the rule of law
- show respect for differences

I am going to comment briefly on each of these American obligations. Then I will talk about moving forward after this week's election.

I consider it important to say up front what I am not talking about. I am not going to discuss my own political views, my own social values, my own religious beliefs, my own economic preferences, my own convictions about the climate or guns or jobs or gender or wages or immigration or technology or abortion or energy or race or sports or sex or taxes or trade or children or crime or women or men or education or medicine, or whatever else might be on a list of topics that attract opinions. My attention is not on the many things that may divide us— that surely do divide us—but rather on the essential things that must unite us.

My first point is that being an American requires accepting the Constitution. I mean accepting all of it, equally, instead of citing a few lines that support one's personal bias.

The zeal you show for the 2nd Amendment or the 3rd Amendment is the same zeal you must show for the 15th Amendment and the 16th Amendment and the 19th Amendment and the 24th Amendment. And the other way around. In whatever ways you affirm Article I about the powers of the Congress, in those ways you must also affirm Article II about the powers of the President. And the other way around. Regarding Article III, about the judiciary, it is obligatory to respect the authority of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution.

As Americans living under our Constitution, we honor how it establishes government as inherently legitimate with real powers. The fact that those powers are limited does not make them any less legitimate or real. That means that it is not okay to be against government in general. There is no "opt out" clause for any American from respect for the Constitution as a whole and in all of its parts.

Every American has a duty to uphold every part of the Constitution. No matter who else may find that commitment challenging, all of us need to affirm the United States Constitution. That is what it means to be an American.

My second point is that being an American means accepting the rule of law. Does anyone really suppose that somehow it is sufficient only to follow some laws because those are the ones that fit conveniently with our personal beliefs or that benefit us? Hardly. We are all obliged to accept all laws as the rule for all of us.

When I was 18 years old, during the Vietnam War, some young men refused to accept the military draft based on a moral conviction. Anyone who did that, as an American was obliged to accept the penalty of going to jail. That was the law. It applied to everyone equally. No belief is above the law.

Today some people from Colorado may want to drive through Nebraska with marijuana in their cars, but that does not fit with the law in our state. They have committed a crime. By the rule of Nebraska law, they will be prosecuted.

Today some people in parts of our country may refuse to pay Federal income taxes. They may hold the view that such taxes are oppressive and wrong and violate their expansive sense of personal freedom. Whatever they believe, they must accept that under the law they are committing a crime, they will be prosecuted, and they can expect to pay fines or serve time.

The same rule of law applies to elections. If the law allows me to swear at the polling place who I am, and to vote on the basis of that sworn statement, then lawfully I get to vote. By the rule of law, neither you nor anyone else can tell me that I should not vote. If by voting I commit election fraud, then the law can and should and hopefully will catch up with me. I should expect to suffer the consequences in that case. All of this scenario is about the rule of law.

Every American has a duty to show acceptance of the rule of law. No matter who else may find that discipline challenging, all of us carry the obligation to live within the law. That is what it means to be an American.

My third point is that being an American means showing respect for differences. From the establishment of our Constitutional government, the phrase *e pluribus unum* has been engraved on the coins and on the heart of our nation. It means, “out of many we are one.” Based on *e pluribus unum*, in 1787 it was vital that people learn to say, “I am an American,” along with “I am a Virginian” or “I am a Rhode Islander.”

That basic point has not changed in 229 years. In 2016 it is vital that people all over the country commit to saying, “I am an American,” along with “I am a liberal” or “I am a conservative” or “I am of African heritage” or “I am of European heritage” or “I am gay” or “I am in a marriage of one woman and one man,” or “I am a graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University” or “I am a high school graduate” or “I am Christian” or “I am Muslim” or one of many other “I am” statements that affirm self-worth yet in no way diminish being an American.

I may really dislike your opinions or your politics or your values. However, as a fellow American I must respect your right to be the way you are and think the way you do. You may dislike my opinions and my politics and my values—everything that you identify with me—and yet as a fellow American you have an obligation to respect my right to hold on to what is dear to me.

We may end up saying harsh things about each other’s beliefs. That will happen during election campaigns. But that harshness cannot be allowed in any way to diminish the humanity of even one of us—nor the American-ness of any one of us.

Every American has a duty to demonstrate acceptance of differences. No matter who else may find that openness challenging, all of us hold the responsibility to accept differences. That is what it means to be an American.

My fourth point is about the 2016 national election. We are all Americans and what happened on November 8 was our election, all of ours.

Very early on Wednesday morning this week, Donald Trump gave a speech accepting election. He said, "It is time for us to come together as one united people. I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be President for all Americans."

Later that morning, Hillary Clinton gave a speech accepting defeat. She said of herself, "I count my blessings every single day that I am an American." She said of her opponent, "I hope that he will be a successful President for all Americans."

Such are the words we expect after a Presidential election, both from the winner and from the loser. We also expect their actions to show the truth of their words. And we expect as much from ourselves, and from each other.

Regardless how each of us voted, the result of the election belongs to all of us. Because we are Americans, because we affirm Constitutional government, because we accept the rule of law, because we show respect for differences, we have an obligation to join together now. We commit ourselves to accept the new President, the new Congress, and the new Supreme Court that the President and the United States Senate will shape together.

On this point about accepting the election result, history offers valuable advice. We can learn from difficult moments in several past Presidential elections, in 1800, in 1860, in 1960, and in 2000.

The Presidential election of 1800 was nasty and personal. It was filled with insults about the two major candidates. President John Adams was seeking reelection and Vice President Thomas Jefferson was trying to replace him. Nasty as that election was, when it was over voters cooled their tempers and respected the result. Americans got on with their government and got on with their lives. That was what it meant more than 200 years ago to be an American. That is what it means today.

President Jefferson talked about the nasty campaign in his 1801 inaugural address. "During the contest of opinion through which we have passed the animation of discussions . . . has sometimes worn an aspect which might impose on strangers." Translation: there had been a lot of trash talk in the campaign. Supporters of Adams slandered Jefferson as "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father." Supporters of Jefferson spread rumors that Adams was a hermaphrodite with "neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman."

That was 1800 electioneering. But when it was over, Jefferson said, "Let us, . . . fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind." In his actions as President he honored those words. Adams and his supporters accepted the result of the election and the need to unite. He retired quietly to his home in Massachusetts.

The Presidential election of 1860 was one of our oddest ever. Our nation was in bad shape. Rancor about slavery threatened to tear the nation apart. The previous 20 years had seen seven different Presidents, too many of them ineffective.

In 1860 in a four-way contest Abraham Lincoln of Illinois was chosen by a minority of the voters. He got only 40 percent of the nationwide vote. Stephen Douglas, also of Illinois, came in second

with 30 percent. John Breckenridge of Kentucky had 18 percent. John Bell of Tennessee had 12 percent. All four of them won some electoral votes. Lincoln, however, had a clear majority in the Electoral College. By Constitution and by law, he was the legitimate President.

It was the only time in our history that the result of a Presidential election was not overwhelmingly honored. Stephen Douglas behaved well. He conceded by writing to Abraham Lincoln, "I am with you, Mr. President, and God bless you." But the lack of acceptance for Lincoln's election plunged the nation into Civil War, our worst crisis ever. Lincoln then held the nation together through incredible, sacrificial leadership, only to pay for it with the loss of his life by an assassin.

One hundred years later, in 1960, the Presidential election was very, very close. I was seven years old; it was the first Presidential election that I remember. John Kennedy out-pollled Richard Nixon by less than two-tenths of one percent of all votes cast.

If 13,000 votes had gone the other way in Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, Nevada, and Hawaii, then Nixon would have received half of the electoral votes. That result would have thrown the election into the House of Representatives. On the other hand, Nixon won Alaska by only 1,000 votes and Montana by 7,000 votes. It was close one way or the other way in most states. This year, state by state, it was not that close.

The 1960 election was the first one conducted largely on television. It was the first election with televised debates between the major candidates. It was an election in which appearances mattered. Nixon declined to use make-up for the debates. As a result, on the television screen he did not make an attractive appearance. It was an election in which mean things were said. Some of Kennedy's opponents claimed that if he, a Roman Catholic, were elected, then the Pope would rule our country.

On the day after the 1960 election, Vice President Nixon said, on national television, "If the present trend continues, Senator Kennedy will be the next President of the United States." He added, "My congratulations to Senator Kennedy for his fine race in this campaign." While not a full concession, those words legitimized Kennedy's win.

In the year 2000 I voted absentee because I knew I would be in Germany on Election Day. I got up on the morning of the day after the election, when it was still the middle of the night here. Germans asked me what was going on with the U. S. Presidential election. I watched the news and could not give a coherent answer.

The result hung in the balance for weeks. There were contentious efforts to recount votes in Florida, followed by a Supreme Court decision that stopped the recounting. Because former Texas Governor George W. Bush received only five more Electoral College votes than Vice President Al Gore, if any state that went to Bush had gone to Gore, Gore would have become President. Only 3,606 votes in New Hampshire would have done that, or 269 votes in Florida! The Electoral College result this year was not nearly that close.

Five weeks after the 2000 election and one day after the Supreme Court decision, on December 13, Al Gore conceded. His seven-minute speech on live national television was a remarkable, graceful, dignified example of patriotism. It was all about honoring the Constitution, obeying the law, and respecting differences.

Gore began, “Just moments ago I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd President of the United States.” Gore quoted Stephen Douglas’s generous statement to Abraham Lincoln: “I am with you, Mr. President, and God bless you.” Gore said that the election had been “resolved, as it must be resolved, through the honored institutions of our democracy.” That was a clear reference to our Constitution—how it distributes electoral votes, as well as the role it gives the Supreme Court in settling great disputes. Gore quoted a principle followed in our country and in England for more than 800 years: “Not under man, but under God and law.” Gore committed himself to “our unity as a people.”

So that there would be no doubt, he was very specific: “I also accept my responsibility, which I will discharge unconditionally, to honor the new President-elect and do everything possible to help him bring Americans together in fulfillment of the great vision that our Declaration of Independence defines and that our Constitution affirms and defends.” Such clear words put the nation first.

Today is Veterans Day. The original name for this day of national remembrance was Armistice Day. Ninety-eight years ago on this eleventh day of the eleventh month, at the eleventh minute past the eleventh hour in the morning, in Europe the Great War of 1914 to 1918 ended. It ended with an armistice agreement, literally a putting down of weapons. Today is a day, therefore, devoted first of all to peace.

In our nation, we can and should have peace among us—however much we disagree with each other—peace among us by each of us honoring what it means to be an American:

- affirm Constitutional government
- accept the rule of law
- show respect for differences

After 1918, in Germany—perhaps a different kind of country from ours—those things did not happen. The German constitution was abused. Lawlessness spread. Instead of respect for differences, some groups of people were treated as less than human. The German nation descended into a chaos that dragged many nations into a Second World War.

We are fortunate citizens of an exceptional nation. The good fortune we Americans share as United States citizens is not by accident, nor by guarantee. It is by our common commitment of adhering to our Constitution, to our laws, and to our respect for differences. Let us all recommit ourselves today to ensure that it continues that way.

Thank you.