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Remarks - Cornbread and Beans

Over a century and a half ago, our ancestors engaged in a great but foolish civil war. At Gettysburg, President Lincoln reminded us that our republic was conceived in liberty, dedicated to equality – but some Americans denied self-evident truths with bullets, bayonets, swords – and treason.

One consequence of Union triumph was a constitutional link between the structures of our national government and the cause of human rights. One nation saw that all desired a civic equality enforced by federal law, but even after Union “victory,” segregation, discrimination, censorship, religious persecution, xenophobia, bigotry and misogyny challenged our aspirations.

We remain engaged in a civil war – a cultural civil war, but our contests are now compromised by alternative facts, denials of science and a great historical amnesia.

A university is one battlefield of that war; so are town halls, bookstores, cyberspace, media and newspapers, and ballot boxes. The world will “little note, nor long remember” tweets and trivia and soundbites – and we are better for it.

But our politics is in disarray; and the failures of the Democratic Party to appreciate our broader constitutional traditions is part of the problem.

None of this is new or original; it is mere restatement of political tradition. It is liberal; and it is conservative. It is nationalist; and federalist. It is democratic; and republican. It is libertarian; it is egalitarian. All labels seem appropriate, and that is a symptom of our political trivial pursuits.

What then does matter? Principles. I suggest seven to guide rethinking.

1. National security is the first duty of the national government, but not aggressive military domination. Many good presidents have spoken of America’s aspirations, but I suggest General Eisenhower may offer a useful formulation of the proper balance influenced by constitutional duty:

“America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller, must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.

“Such a confederation must be one of equals. The weakest must come to the conference table with the same confidence as do we, protected as we are by our moral, economic, and military strength. That table, though scarred by many past frustrations, cannot be abandoned for the certain agony of the battlefield.”

2. The nation’s strength and health depends on internal improvements; not the wreck and ruin political tactics that brought us shutdowns, and obstructionism. The conservatism of Hamilton and Henry Clay, FDR and Eisenhower required national

improvements – canals and turnpikes, then railroads and telegraph lines, now highways and broadband communications. Today, we need new energy sources and new green structures that conserves our air, water and environment.

3. A first promise of constitutionalism is the pursuit of domestic tranquility & stability. Presidents swear to preserve, to stabilize and to protect. It is this constitutional duty that transforms every President, save one, into a Burkean figure. But today, the so-called alt.right, the populist right thrives on the voice of the mob.

Our nation suffers because of the slow, painful and tragic death of a genuine conservatism. I do not mean that the Republican party or the so-called alt.right is in danger of extinction. I suggest only that the fundamentals of conservatism, born of the horrified reactions of the French Revolution, have little or no role in contemporary American politics.

We must remember: it is not conservative to make America selfish again; ...to make America fear again; to make America hate again.

4. Public education rests on the premise that knowledge will forever govern ignorance [as Madison once wrote] Conservatives once cherished education as a Jeffersonian way to transmit the values and traditions of the past into coherent shared civic virtues, including respect for science, fact, history, and the rule of law.

“[U]nless we get up off our fat surpluses and recognize that television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us, then television and those who finance it, those who look at it and those who work at it, may see a totally different picture too late.... If we go on as we are, then history will take its revenge, and retribution will not limp in catching up with us.” – Edward R. Murrow, 1958

5. We all want limited government. Some want respect for individual autonomy; others want respect for free markets. Conservatives once displayed a skeptical leadership by reminding all of utopian schemes and perfectionist quests; as they once celebrated limited government, they would not dare to speak of sweeping executive powers “that will not be questioned.” At its best, a skeptical conservatism was reality-based philosophy that did not manipulate alternative facts, fake news, stereotypes, shrieks of fear, cries of carnage and prophecies of impending doom. And that conservatism was a characteristic of both dominant political parties.
6. Civic virtue means respecting the rights of others. As always, Lincoln’s words teach well: *“Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises. And let me tell you, all these things are prepared for you with the logic of history....”*
7. “Justice is the end of civil government. It ... will be pursued, until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit. In a society under the forms of which the stronger

faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign, as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger.” [Madison] Government must protect the weak from exploitation by the stronger; it must protect all lives from violence, and in the modern era, it must maintain and repair the social safety nets to protect all from catastrophic bad luck and undeserved fate.

Of course, Americans differ on details. But our worries – legitimate, reasonable worries – should not distract us from awareness of shared values and traditional consensus. The Democratic party must rediscover its talent for building a big tent, and it should relearn tactics and strategies of building on consensus, tradition and common ground.