

What Does Make America Great!

Delivered by the Hon. Mark I. Bernstein (Ret.)
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My friends, it's getting dark out, and our mission as a religious community and as individuals is to shed light.

I want to speak about myth. I want to talk about what makes America great and about our American myths. There may be others, but this is about two predominant and incompatible American myths. And this is about why today, our myths and our beliefs are more important than ever.

The first is the myth of the rugged individual living by determination, grace and grit. We've all seen the movies. The individual making the land productive in the face of drought and Indian assaults. The individual, and perhaps his wife, struggling to make a stand, fighting alone and winning—or at least keeping the foreigners, the Indians, at bay. Finally, in the last scene, the rugged individual frontiersman is holed up in his house or barn, protecting his family, or is behind some rock where he has retreated. He says to his wife and child, huddled close, "I have only one bullet left, but son, here's a lesson you should never forget. Although I won't be there to guide you, remember this: 'You can only rely on yourself, and an American never gives up!'" But before that last bullet is fired, off in the distance, as everyone stops to listen, a bugle call is heard. Like Mighty Mouse, the cavalry arrives: "Here We Come to Save The Day!" Anyone ever see that myth on the big screen?

No one mentions that this is the government bailing out the individuals, who rightfully and justly have no business on Indian land in the first place. Hollywood loves this myth but so too does the rancher grazing his animals on public land while complaining about government

interference. That myth is also loved by big oil, soon to be lobbying for their rights to retain industry tax breaks and the right to also use public land for drilling and mining. That is also a myth loved by the homesteader, rescuing the land in the middle of the country without any acknowledgement that the government through the Homestead Act gave them that land. It could even have been the myth shared by the slaves freed by the Civil War, since they were promised 40 acres and a mule on January 16, 1865, by William T. Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15. That could be their myth as well, except that 40 acres and a mule never happened. President Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, a staunch Unionist from Tennessee but a southern sympathizer, overturned the order in the fall of 1865. As historian Barton Myers sadly concludes, he "returned the land along the South Carolina, Georgia and Florida coasts to the planters who had originally owned it" — to the very people who had declared war on the United States to deny black people freedom.

I think it was 7th grade, perhaps 8th, when we studied American History. The first semester took us through the Civil War. The second semester started with the Western Frontier. The balloon over my head said, "Oops, we never studied about Reconstruction" (the period immediately after the Civil War). Now, believe it or not, in school I was reticent, nerdy, rarely making waves of any kind, also rarely working hard, but that is a different story. But as that second semester teacher began the first lesson with the Wild West, I raised my hand and said, "but we skipped over Reconstruction." Her curt answer was "that was covered in the first half!" I somehow got the courage to say, "But we didn't get to it!" and was told to sit down because "that was supposed to be covered in the first semester."

Why do we ignore Reconstruction? We ignore it because the shameful return to white supremacy after the Great Compromise of 1877, and our shameful history of slavery, Jim Crow

and discrimination, which continues to today, put the lie to our founding principles and to that first John Wayne myth.

No, America is not the land of that myth, however cherished by Hollywood and others. There is another myth, a truly noble myth.

That other myth may be called the melting pot. Wave after wave of Irish, German, Polish, Italian and Jewish people created an immigrant stream from Ellis Island to California, and as they become Americans they make this country great. And there are other usually ignored streams, from China and Japan, and Mexico and South America. People coming to The Land of the Free, The Land of Opportunity, whose streets are yet today paved with gold. This American myth is dramatized by the 1883 poem *The New Colossus*, by Emma Lazarus:

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning...From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

What makes a country? Often it starts with a tribe and a leader who conquers and unifies neighboring peoples until that one supreme people calls itself a country. The Bible tells this story with Moses and Joshua conquering the Promised Land. Usually a country is cohesive because of an ethnic commonality. When Italy became a country in the 1860s its revolutionaries consolidated city states that shared a common language and a common history, the glorious Roman heritage. Bismarck unified Germany from many German states, through common language, and, sadly, conceptions of race. The artificial boundaries established by world war and colonialism have resulted in constant warfare and ethnic cleansing in Africa and the Balkans

because those artificial boundaries never shared common ethnic or tribal unity. Too often we learn of internal ethnic strife around the world. Ethnic and cultural unity is the common glue which hold a country and government together.

Our United States was founded on a very different principle. This country was founded not on a principle of cultural, ethnic or religious unity. Rather, as set forth in our truly revolutionary document, the Declaration of Independence, it was founded on a profound philosophical principle about inalienable truths regardless of diversity, the principle that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

However hypocritically those slaveholders wrote those words, 50 years later Abraham Lincoln led the country through a terrible Civil War to make reality (or at least begin to make reality) of that word “all.” 154 years ago and 137 miles away, Lincoln said, “Now we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” The words “so conceived” and “so dedicated” meant our founding principle, the equality of creation.

As I was writing this sermon Linda said, “Mark, it’s a sermon not a legal exegesis.” If she knew the turn it was taking she would have added “or a historical lecture.”

Undaunted, I searched out a lecture written by our most respected professor at St. John’s College which I had purchased for 75 cents in 1968. I had saved it for 48 years: “A Reading of the Gettysburg Address” by Dr. Eva Brann. This reminded me that Lincoln fought to preserve the Union and free the slaves as a sacred mission to preserve this remarkable philosophical basis of our nationhood and correct its most glaring hypocrisy. He called these political principles “moral sentiments.”

And lo and behold! Who should appear in this lecture but the abolitionist Unitarian minister, the Reverend Theodore Parker. The words of that great Unitarian forefather are relevant today because he was speaking, writing and preaching in times of deadly division, disruption and intolerance. Times like ours, when hate was on the rise, and civil discourse not at all civil. His words are relevant today because the sacred founding principle which makes our country great, and unique in all of history of the world, is a religious principle: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Our country was born from the proposition that this equality is a “self-evident” truth. As Rev. Parker said, “Human history could not justify the Declaration of Independence and its large statements of the new idea: the nation went beyond human history and appealed to human nature.” This same self-evident truth we call our first principle: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Reverend Parker distinguished between what he called “Satanic democracy,” characterized by selfish interest groups battling for power, and another form of democracy to which America should aspire based on the idea that, in his words, “there is no permanent and real welfare for any one portion in Society except in connection with the welfare of all the rest of the nation.”

That identifies the problem that we, who believe in the “worth and dignity of every person,” confront today. That is the public battle we must fight.

The Roman politician and philosopher Cicero identified three criteria for public moral goodness:

The first is the ability to distinguish truth from falsity, and to understand the relationship between one phenomenon and another and the causes and

consequences of each. The second is the ability to restrain the passions. And the third is to behave considerately and understandingly in our associations with other people.

Our parallel U-U principles include two other principles: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning”; and “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.”

Sadly, today our public discourse violates all of the principles of Cicero and the U-U. How must we, as individuals and as a religious community who believe in inherent worth, dignity and equality, respond when anti-American, evil people are given license and empowered to crawl into public view?

Towards the end of my judicial career, when I understood I would soon be retiring, I became fixated on Nazism. Book after book, beginning with the fiction writer Philip Kerr, whose main character Bernie Gunther is a moral Berlin homicide detective at the start of the Third Reich. Eventually he can no longer tolerate Nazi “police” work because when a body is found in Berlin he understands that the murder investigation must stop immediately should he determine that the victim is Jewish. He recognizes that if he really wanted to apprehend murderers all he needed to do was take down the names of the Nazis beating up people on the street and arrest them as the perpetrators when a victim died.

I read spy novels, histories, memoirs, newspaper articles. Finally, I realized that this mini-obsession was an attempt to answer the question, “How does one live morally in a society grounded in hypocrisy and racism?”

I became more and more depressed until finally I was able to stop when I read the novel *In the Garden of the Beasts* by Erik Larson and the author’s comment on all the research he had done: “What I did not realize as I ventured into those dark days of Hitler’s rule was how much that darkness would infiltrate my own soul.”

Sadly, today, we can torment our souls just by reading today's paper or watching the evening news.

Many politicians lie, either knowingly or ignorantly making promises which in the result prove to be impossible. Few, but sadly some today, follow Goebbels policy of "the big lie." Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*, spoke about a lie so "colossal" that no one would believe that someone "could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously." He followed "the principle that when one lies, one should lie big, and stick to it" and "keep up [the] lies, even at the risk of looking ridiculous." The U.S. Office of Strategic Services described Hitler's method of "the big lie" this way:

Never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.

Does this sound sadly familiar today?

Our founding equality myth is worth fighting for. Not supported by history, not practiced in any other country, this is a noble myth that we can build a land where ALL people are respected and judged not by the color of their skin or who they love or what they believe but by their character and their actions.

These thoughts of what really makes America great are not mine alone. Two weeks ago, David Brooks, writing in the *New York Times*, contrasted these same American myths:

The Trump story is that good honest Americans are being screwed by aliens. Regular Americans are being oppressed by a snobbish elite that rigs the game in its favor. White Americans are being invaded by immigrants who take their wealth and divide their culture.

Their tribe needs a strong warrior in a hostile world.

This is a deeply wrong and un-American story (he says) because we are not a tribe. We are founded on universal principles, attracting talented people from across the globe, active across the world on behalf of all people who seek democracy and dignity.

These Americans built railroads and roads to increase mobility. They tore down social, racial and legal barriers to give poor boys and girls an open field and a fair chance. Today, the main enemy is not aliens; it's division — between rich and poor, white and black, educated and less educated, right and left. Where there is division there are fences.

This month's *Atlantic* magazine too has an article—"Is the American Idea Over?"—which quotes our Rev. Parker:

The American idea, Parker declared in an 1850 speech, comprised three elements: that all people are created equal, that all possess unalienable rights, and that all should have the opportunity to develop and enjoy those rights. Securing them required "a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people," Parker said.

According to the *Atlantic*, "[t]he Civil War tested whether a nation built around that idea could 'long endure.'" Lincoln's Gettysburg address echoed Parker's speech, defining the American idea to make clear that only the people could determine whether "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

When the Union prevailed, it enshrined this vision in the Constitution with a series of amendments banning slavery, extending equal protection of the law and safeguarding the right to vote for Americans of all races.

All of this has left many Americans feeling disoriented, their faith that their nation has something distinctive to offer the world shaken. On the left, many have gravitated toward a strange sort of universalism, focusing on America's flaws while admiring other nations' virtues.

They decry nationalism and covet open borders, imagining a world in which ideas can prevail without nations to champion them.

Our political rhetoric is curiously devoid of references to a common civic creed. Instead a more generic nationalism—one defined, like any other nation, by culture and borders and narrow interests and enemies—is promoted.

Both visions are corrosive. America is an ethnically, geographically and economically varied land. What helps unite us is a nationalism grounded in a shared set of ideals, ideals that serve as a source of national pride and future promise.

Vitriol and divisiveness are commonly blamed for the problems of contemporary politics. But Americans aren't fighting too hard. They're engaged in the wrong fights. The universalism of the left and cultural nationalism of the right are battering America's sense of common national purpose. Under attack on both flanks, and weakened by its failure to deliver exceptional results, the nation's shared identity is crumbling.

The greatest danger facing American democracy is complacency. This, really, is the American idea: that prosperity and justice do not exist in tension, but flow from each other. Achieving that ideal will require fighting as if the fate of democracy itself rests upon the struggle—because it does.

The political world we confront today, which seems to reject our founding ideals and allows and encourages traitors to come out from under rocks, is temporary. And this fortuitous fact, perhaps, allows us to confront and extinguish these American traitors through the ideals that really do make us great.

The traitors have always been around. Being brought into the open air allows us to confront them. It is simply true, and a religious proposition, that those who support Fascism, Nazism, Racism and Sexism are not the moral equivalent of those who stand up against them, those who stand up for the worth and dignity of every person!

Our country is waiting for us to have the guts to say no to tribe, yes to universal nation, no to the closed, and yes to the open future, no to the fear-driven homogeneity of the old and yes to diverse hopefulness. It may be dormant, but the striving American dream is still lurking in every heart.

So, how do we, as individuals, as families, as a congregation, as a religion, live morally in today's environment? We are encouraged that we are not alone, a new energy is released in our country, young people everywhere recognize the dangers. People spontaneously gather to ask what they can do and to act collectively.

Our U-U mission today—and it is our religious mission—is to proclaim from every mountain top and public square that the inherently equal worth and dignity of every person is what makes America great! We must fight as if the fate of democracy itself rests upon the struggle—because it does!

Do we fear we are not up to the task?

Ask Margaret Meade, who said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

And, finally, other hopeful words you will recognize, first said by Rev. Parker:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.