

Independence Day, 2005 Stan Stahl, Ph.D.

Dear Uncle Sam –

Rita, Jonathan, Cody & I want to wish you a happy 229th birthday. I hope that you and the other founders living in *Patriot Heaven* are having a great celebration. You certainly deserve it.

I often think about all you've been through so that *we, the people* could live free today, to celebrate your birthday with you. When you were born 229 years ago, it was *the times that try men's souls*; a time when the King lived free, but the people did not; a time when the King's word was law, not the reasoned will of the people; a time when liberty and justice belonged, not to the people, but to the King.

I have always felt grateful for your birth that July day in Philadelphia; a birth *conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal*. That's why I enjoy celebrating your birthday, taking a few moments to remember all you've been through so that we might enjoy the blessings of liberty, and reflecting on what we must do so that our posterity might also enjoy liberty's blessings.

You almost didn't make two months. Was it providence that allowed Washington's army to escape General Howe that fateful day in late-August when rain and fog suddenly descended on New York's East River? Or was it fate? Or maybe just luck? Whatever the cause, had that fog not been there it's likely that our war for independence might have ended in our swift and ignominious defeat.

I've always felt you truly came of age in your 11th year, the year of the great *Constitutional Convention*. That, to me, is the year you discovered *reasoned compromise based on mutual respect* as the keystone of successful self-government. And knowing human nature as you so well did, you crafted a magnificent mechanism of checks and balances to pull us towards reasoned compromise.

In your 80s, when most of us are thinking of slowing down, you fought your second great battle. Reasoned compromise had broken down and we were at civil war with ourselves. Your wisdom, Sam, guided us through those dark days, giving us a *new birth of freedom*. With the Union's victory in the Civil War, *government of the people by the people, and for the people, did not perish from the earth*.

We sure could use a good healthy dose of your wisdom now. It seems to me that *reason, compromise* and *mutual respect* are in awfully short supply in Washington, DC. Reason, it seems, is too often being replaced by dogma. Mutual respect seems no longer to exist. And compromise hangs by a thread.

And all the while, Sam, we face serious challenges.

We must stay the course of inculcating freedom and democracy in Iraq, for to leave the country to the terrorists would set back our interests in the region for a generation or longer. More broadly we must simultaneously work to defeat terrorism while eliminating the conditions that breed terrorism.

We must deal with the development of nuclear weapons in both Iran and North Korea, and the reasonable expectation that an Iranian nuclear weapon might find its way into the hands of Osama Bin Laden.

We must deal with the economic realities of the global revolution and our own aging population. And we must simultaneously manage global warming, environmental pollution, and sustainable economic development.

Here at home, our greatest challenges are visionary moral. As Pericles in Athens and the Bible both point out: *Without vision, the people perish.*

We desperately need to find a way to identify our national values with the great moral truths of our religions — to establish justice—without imposing their religious context on the people. You and the founders understood the difference between moral values and religion. Too many today want to obscure that difference. Too many today echo the first President Bush when he said in a 1987 speech: “I don't know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.” How sad.

We need to find the right balance between a woman's right to manage her body and the rights of the fetus she carries.

We need to help those who oppose equality for gays and lesbians understand that none are free if all aren't free, that to limit freedom for some is to limit the blessings of liberty for all.

And we need to rededicate ourselves to the great task of making the American dream a reality for all of our brothers and sisters, securing the blessings of liberty to our posterity, as you secured them for us.

No doubt the far right must have its day, just like the left had theirs in the 1960s. Partly it's power, but I must also acknowledge that it's their country too. And part of your genius, Sam, was recognizing the great truth that the country belongs to all of us. That means we have to lower our voices and listen to their needs, knowing that listening begins the generation of *reason, compromise* and *mutual respect*.

No doubt, as well, the far left will not be listening, but will be doing battle. This too will be good for the country for it will limit the excesses of the far right. You understood 'force and counterforce' and gave us a Constitution designed to limit the excesses even of a majority.

The next battle will be over the President's nominee to replace retiring Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. How ironic, for O'Connor was a true pragmatic centrist. She would extend the law only when absolutely necessary to the cause of freedom and equality, while always insisting that any extension be limited to the absolute minimum necessary to meet the situation.

O'Connor expressed the basis of *reason, compromise* and *mutual respect* best in her 2003 commencement address at George Washington University Law School:

The words [of the law] are words of equality, justice, fairness, consistency, predictability, balance, equity, of wrongs righted, and the repose of disputes settled without violence, without undue advantage, and without leaving either side with bitter feelings of having been cheated. It is the music sung in the world of child-like innocence in which the lion lies down with the lamb. Perhaps it's a world that never was nor ever will be, but it is a world worth living toward.

As you know, Sam, I've always been an optimist. My optimism is based on my great faith in the wisdom of *we, the people*; ordinary people, like Sandra Day O'Connor, who recognize that we find the American dream collectively or not at all.

Everywhere I go I meet people who are unhappy with the behavior of our major party leaders, who are appalled with the absence of reason, compromise and mutual respect they find in Washington, and who

would vote for someone of integrity who sought to unite the middle to actually meet the challenges we face, to form that more perfect union.

My generation and the next has also learned to improve our inter-personal skills, learning better how to get along in this diverse world, learning how to find the creative compromise that magically exists in the place of lowered voices.

So, it's only a matter of time, Sam, until the middle coalesces, until America takes its next great leap forward. And, when it happens, Sam, it will be on your wings.

So happy birthday, Sam. Many happy returns. Give our best to Thomas, George, John, Abraham, and the other patriots.

Let Freedom Ring.