

Presidents Day, 2004 Stan Stahl, Ph.D.

*A house divided against itself cannot stand.
Abraham Lincoln*

On September 19, 1796, George Washington, father of our country and the only President the young United States knew, announced, in his Farewell Address to the Nation, that he would not consider another term. In his Farewell Address, Washington challenged us to seek a politics of consensus, warning us against single-issue political movements, and against the separation of America into racial, ethnic, religious or gender-based constituencies.

Two hundred eight years later the dangers that Washington warned us about are everywhere to be found. America is breaking apart into factions and special interest groups. Each group, each faction, each constituency is fighting to hold onto its piece of ground, ignoring the opportunity to find common ground. The President, and his Democratic opponents, vow to lead their particular constituencies to victory.

Nowhere is this more apparent—and perhaps most saddening—then in the battles between the secular left and the religious right. These two constituencies, each legitimate historical extensions of 400 years of America’s struggle for freedom, have so much to teach us about freedom and the values intrinsic to it. And yet they fight against each other, neither side seeming to have any interest in listening to the truths of the other.

The battle has erupted again within the last month over the issue of gay marriage. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the birthplace of liberty, seems locked into a divisive “win-lose” battle, with each side claiming to speak for the “true” America.

It seems to me, with all due respect, that neither side speaks for America, that if either side ‘wins,’ America—and the cause of freedom—will be the loser.

If the religious right wins, gay and lesbian couples will have their right to be treated equally—as in *all men [and women] are created equal with inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*—denied.

If the secular left wins, the religious right will feel increased alienation from a society that seems to be turning away from all that they hold sacred, seeing increasing encroachment on their fundamental beliefs and the values that they believe have been a part of America since its founding, values that have made America great.

If either side wins, the other side will have less of a stake in America. And with that, America—and the cause of freedom—will be the loser.

I think there's a better way. A way where freedom wins, with free people of all points-of-view working together to evolve the best possible society. This, after all, is the premise of freedom: that the best society is what you get when free people have the opportunity to figure it out collaboratively.

Washington told us what we need to do: Grow a politics of national consensus. Avoid factionalism. Strive towards national unity.

Abraham Lincoln, whose memory along with Washington's we celebrate on President's Day, told us how:

“If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which is the high road to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble in convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause be a just one.”

Might I respectfully suggest that the secular left and the religious right seek ways where each can be the other's sincere friend, looking for opportunities to find common ground.

I think the large majority of American people want this done, want us to seek common ground. And I think we could find common ground if we all lowered our voices and listened to each other, becoming each other's sincere friend.

Let me use pro-choice vs. right-to-life as an example of where common ground might be found. It shouldn't matter to the pro-choice side if pregnancies were never terminated, so long as the laws permitted it. And if there were never any abortions, it should not matter to the right-to-life side if abortions are not illegal. Wouldn't America be better off if we quit fighting over the legalities and found ways to work together to eliminate any need to terminate a pregnancy early, including an end to rape, incest, unmarried teen pregnancies, and birth defects?

We are not going to find common ground by fighting. We Americans were born fighting tyrants; we kicked George III out of the colonies in 1776. Americans don't succumb to the will of tyrants and I doubt that either the secular left or the religious right will succumb to the tyranny of the other.

While we have always fought tyrants, we have also always come together in creative compromise when freedom was at stake. The very story of our Constitution demonstrates this fundamental American truth. Our noble experiment in a free people governing themselves was borne out of compromise after compromise after compromise: large states vs. small states, the industrial north vs. the agricultural south, federalists vs. those fearing central government. And the greatest compromise of all, the compromise over slavery; a compromise that, from the standards of today was a reprehensible evil, but without which there would have been no Union.

Do not underestimate the danger. Freedom is at stake. The battle, this time, is internal. It is about who we are and what we stand for. And about what we look like to the rest of the world. It's the battle that Washington warned us about: single-issue political movements, and the separation of America into racial, ethnic, religious, and gender-based constituencies.

It is time for us to stand up and say there is but one constituency in America ... freedom.

Together, we, the people, must commit to work together to complete the Constitution's vision of America: *to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.*

Benjamin Franklin, when he completed signing the *Declaration of Independence*, turned to the assembled delegates to the Continental Congress and said "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

It's time to hang together.

Let Freedom Ring.