

United States of America in 2021

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January 17, 2021 Jack Gist



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Author's note: *This essay is a response to Carl E. Olson's January 6, 2021 CWR editorial titled "Who are we, really, as Americans?"*

New Tribalism

There is much confusion in America today, and our citizens need to get back to basics before we reach a point

of no return. Institutional forces have muddied American cultural to the point that clarity and common sense seem like artifacts from a bygone age. One approach to clearing up the confusion is to stop and ponder the most basic principles of the nation's founding. **The United States was intended to be a country where individuals, not institutions, define our culture:** rule by the People and for the People. Far too often over the last several decades this equation has been flipped on its head. Institutions—political, educational, legal—have come to consider themselves as the progenitors of culture rather than its protectors. This backward approach has led us to the cliff's edge. It's not too late to back away. We don't have to jump into the abyss.

America (as elsewhere) has been embroiled in a culture war for the better part of a century. It is tearing our nation apart. People now adopt political identities—Woke, Deplorable, Globalist, Nationalist, Progressive, Conservative (to name several among many)—to the detriment of both individuality and reason. These group identities demarcate boundaries in the guise of *e pluribus unum*, “out of many, one,” in which many individuals are absorbed by this or that group. Instead of bringing people together, these boundaries pit groups against one another in New Tribalism. Identity groups based on race, gender, and political affiliation masquerade as individuals lacking common ground.

In this brave new world, the “one” springing from the “many,” the common ground envisioned by the Founders, has been fenced off into fiefdoms

of intolerance. Here reason gives way to sophistry where the worst argument can appear to be the best and the best the worst. Micro-aggressions lead to gargantuan grievances. Forces of elitism gather under the banner of “Equity and Diversity” in our government, high-tech corporations (and others), and public education. In this dizzying display of irony, tolerance has become intolerable.

Common ground

Rather than promoting a forum for public discourse where all voices can be heard, we draw battle lines based on the likes of superficial differences of skin color or ethnicity. The result has been riots and censorship. Good citizens from all walks watch in horror as our cities burn, our Capitol is breached, our people die, and hate flourishes. “What went wrong?” is the question first and foremost on many a mind. It is the wrong question. To understand how we got to this point, we must look back to where the American experiment began and ascertain not what the Founders got wrong but what they got right.

To know where we are going, we must know where we have been. In the current climate, where **history is under attack by those who would rewrite it to gain power**, when statues are destroyed and churches are burned, the map to the past leads to the City of Despair, not Utopia. **The sins of our history have been placed under the microscope. The remainder of our past has been cast aside.** Guilt burns through collective consciousness of America like the sun through

an ant pinned under a magnifying glass. Many are mesmerized by the evils that men do. **Captivated by the wicked, we forsake the good.** I am reminded of Dante's deepest circle of hell, where Satan's stronghold has been designed to keep God out rather than the Prince of Lies inside.

If everyone takes a deep breath and pulls back, most Americans should be able to agree that our country was founded upon the concept of liberty and religious freedom. **Freedom is our common ground.** It is the foundation of the Common Good. Liberty—along with life and the pursuit of happiness—doesn't belong to and isn't the product of an institution. It does not belong to and is not created by politicians, professors, lawyers, or any other profession. It is the inalienable right of every citizen of the United States. Recognizing this fact is the genius of the Founders. Implementing it where there was and is a stew of competing political and ideological interests is easier said than done. Nevertheless, overall, a cursory glance at the history will reveal that the overall thrust behind the American story, despite bloody and shameful chapters, has been a striving for liberty.

Once more, however, as was the case with Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement, we find ourselves at a defining moment. **How much are we willing to sacrifice for freedom?** In the Revolutionary War, patriots refused to submit to the British Crown and so risked everything. In the Civil War, it was decided, at a great cost of American lives, that slavery is antithetical to liberty; the two cannot co-exist.

Americans furthered the cause for equal justice during the Civil Rights Movement, and there they made significant gains.

Today, we are faced with a new challenge, equally as urgent as those movements that came before it. The cause is the same but the battleground is unfamiliar. **Some, as always, who clamor for freedom, have ulterior motives. Others are now confused as to what the terms “freedom” and “liberty” actually mean. In a culture delirious from the poison of relativism, “freedom” can mean anything to anybody. Competing definitions are equal and none rise to the level of truth. This is the field of the enemy. The home-field advantage has been stolen by an invading force.**

If we are to regain the advantage and continue the slow march towards liberty, it will be necessary to make a **crucial distinction between the phrases *to be free* and the *freedom to act*. To be free from oppression is one thing. To act as a free individual is another. Both are necessary. One divorced from the other is like a one-sided coin, an absurdity.** Nevertheless, each side of the coin must remain distinguishable from the other, both a heads and tails—two sides—are necessary for the existence of the coin.

Ideally, each American must be free from oppression to take a stance on being. To be free from oppression, however, is not enough. One must then act upon that freedom. **They must act by taking a stand on being.** One can choose to be a lawyer, a teacher, a politician, a

pilot, a priest, or a ballerina. The ideal is for each citizen to have the freedom to take whatever stand on being he or she ascertains is best. For the initial act of taking a stand to remain viable, the individual must continue to act upon their freedom with one essential caveat: **these actions must contribute positively to the Common Good.** Liberty is a dynamic process, not a static idea wrapped up in a narrative of identity politics. In order to flourish, freedom must be enacted by citizens who understand that civic virtue begins with an acknowledgment of our common ground. The common ground is what we call America.

I propose a question: no matter your ethnicity, religion, politics, gender, or anything else, how does your individual identity help to fertilize our common ground? The soil is almost exhausted, and there is no time for it lie fallow. **Invasive weeds from foreign political philosophies will flourish if we do not tend to the field.**

Unity through singularity

The Declaration of Independence is a foundational document to American Identity. All parties, whether individual or group, must agree on this point if they are to be American. It is prudent to pause and reflect on the opening words:

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with

another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Contained within this short passage is the essence of the American Dream. We are one people. Among these people are individuals with certain unalienable rights. This is unity through singularity. These rights come not from institutions, political groups, or even individuals. They are endowed by the Creator of the Laws of Nature, the Creator of all things seen and unseen.

I am a practical Catholic man. In America, this is well and good. It is also well and good to be Protestant. Or Hindu. Or Muslim. Religious freedom is a core component of the American founding. Each must choose (so long as that choice contributes to the Common Good). Religious freedom is the burden of both liberty and of the soul, of the nation and of the individual. The bedrock of American identity, then, is the reality of a Creator. Stripped or forgetful of this, we are no longer America, and the dream thereof transmogrifies into a confusion of competing desires.

The American Dream is not to be found in wealth, fame, or power. It is the dream that all humans may have an equal share of liberty to pursue a life of happiness that contributes to the Common Good. We are one people. As Jesus made clear, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Promoting unity over division requires that all Americans understand that the American Dream has never been a reality, as this is the nature of dreams. America will never be the City of God. **In a fallen world, utopias do not and cannot exist.** Nevertheless, **each one of us, alone and together, must strive to reach the ideal of liberty and justice for all.** Those who surrender to weariness, despair, or selfish desire betray their fellow citizens. If too many succumb, the American Dream is gone, and may God have mercy on our souls.

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Jack Gist is a humanities professor who has published in such journals as *Crisis*, *The Imaginative Conservative*, *New Oxford Review*, *Academic Questions*, and *St. Austin Review*.