Every political debate in the United States seems to generate a frenzy. It isn’t merely that modern Americans vociferously disagree over policy; it’s that they so frequently frame these disputes as proxy battles in a much larger fight over the meaning of America’s most fundamental values. Are President Joe Biden’s recent immigration reforms an expression of America’s identity as a “nation of immigrants,” or are they a betrayal of the nation’s commitment to struggling Americans already living within our borders? Are policies promoting diversity and equity a step forward in America’s ongoing struggle for racial justice, or are they a perversion of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of a nation where citizens would be judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character”?

Whether we’re discussing family policy, the structure of the tax system, the pursuit of free trade, or the promotion of democracy abroad, Americans increasingly accuse their political opponents of not only being wrong on policy specifics, but of misunderstanding, and even deliberately distorting, the values and principles that define the nation itself.

In his inaugural address, Biden acknowledged this growing threat of division and discord, calling on Americans to join in an effort to restore “the most elusive of all things in a democracy: unity.” Without unity, he warned, we will not be able “to restore the soul [or] secure the future of America.” Citing St. Augustine, Biden outlined a vision grounded in the “common objects we as Americans love, that define us as Americans,”

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including “[o]pportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honor and, yes, the truth.”

But Biden’s broad notion of unity obscures more than it reveals. Certainly, Americans do share a commitment to respect and honor, to liberty and security, and to the truth. The problem of growing disunity arises from Americans’ inability to agree on what these defining concepts mean and what a commitment to them entails. Who is worthy of respect and honor? What kinds of liberty, and how much of it, should Americans preserve? Who and what threaten the nation’s security, and how should the state manage those threats? The divisiveness that characterizes this period of American history is not the result of the emergence of some new, foreign set of values in the nation’s politics, but of Americans’ failure to reach a consensus about the meaning of their shared political inheritance. Invoking these core concepts cannot alone heal a nation that is torn apart over the concepts themselves.

When a similar conflict over national values and principles threatened the unity of the country during the 19th century, Abraham Lincoln devoted much of his energy—and a number of key speeches—to the question of national harmony and perpetuation. As a young man, Lincoln favored a strategy for preserving unity through appeals to dispassionate reason and Enlightenment philosophy. He was convinced that the nation could be held together through a rational defense of the republic’s founding principles.

Yet as discord escalated into civil war, Lincoln turned to something more like a Biblical approach to preserving unity—one grounded in appeals to shared memory. In the intervening years, he had come to realize that the active recollection of national memory is what draws people together and clarifies the meaning of their common political inheritance.

For the American statesmen confronting the forces of discord and division that once again threaten the unity of the nation, there is much to be learned from the evolution of Lincoln’s reasoning. And for a riven people who feel they no longer share much with their fellow citizens other than their history, Lincoln’s shared-memory approach to fostering unity has much to offer.

**ANSWERING MOBOCRACY**

In 1838, a 28-year-old Lincoln delivered his speech on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” before the young men’s Lyceum of
Springfield, Illinois. The primary theme of the speech was the forces that Lincoln believed threatened to destroy America’s political institutions: an “increasing disregard for law which pervades the country” and a “mobocratic spirit” that was “abroad in the land.”

In Lincoln’s telling, “the attachment of the People” to their political order is “the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly of those constituted like ours.” This attachment, however, can “be broken down and destroyed” when, as a result of widespread lawlessness, a people cease to be “averse to a change in which they imagine they have nothing to lose.” If the “good men, men who love tranquility, who desire to abide by the laws” are unfairly harmed by the lawless, they will themselves “become tired of, and disgusted with, a Government that offers them no protection.” Instead of preserving those institutions, the people will soon scrap and replace them.

What had led to such lawlessness? Some argued that it stemmed from the growing discord between slave states and free states, but Lincoln rejected this theory. The lawlessness he observed had “pervaded the country, from New England to Louisiana... neither [is it] confined to the slaveholding, or the non-slaveholding States.” Lincoln posited that the problem could instead be traced to a lack of commitment to the law. To this, he proposed a solution: that every American swear “never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others.” He called for “reverence for the laws” to become the “political religion of the nation,” which would be “breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges... let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice.”

Yet Lincoln understood that this answer was insufficient. To bolster it, he turned his attention to the early days of the American republic, and to the “many props” the fledgling institutions had to support them.

The first such prop was born of the fact that America was an “undecided experiment” about “the capability of a people to govern themselves.” People of the time “sought celebrity and fame, and distinction... in the success of that experiment,” and so they invested great energy toward advancing America’s governing institutions. Yet by the 1830s, many had concluded that “[t]he experiment [was] successful,” and with this pronouncement, the motivating “pleasures of the chase” were lost.
The second prop Lincoln identified as supporting the early American republic was the “influence which the interesting scenes of the revolution had upon the passions of the people.” These passions became “active agents in the advancement of the noblest cause—that of establishing and maintaining civil and religious liberty.” Here, too, Lincoln observed that “this state of feeling must fade, is fading, has faded, with the circumstances that produced it.” With these two mainstays of government having “decayed, and crumbled away,” Lincoln sought to determine whether they could somehow be restored or replaced to address the encroaching forces of lawlessness.

He turned first to the notion of a collective, national memory, but found this solution wanting. The influence of the “scenes of the revolution” that had propelled commitment to the American experiment in its earliest years “[could not] be what it heretofore [had] been.” This was true, he argued, because memories of such events could not “be so universally known, nor so vividly felt, as they were by the generation just gone to rest.” In that generation, “nearly every adult male had been a participator in some of [the Revolution’s] scenes,” and every family, therefore, had a “living history” to guide their passions toward the continuation of their new country. These memories, carried forth by the men who had fought for independence, had formed “the pillars of the temple of liberty.” But because these men had passed on, the vividness of their memories had dimmed over time—the pillars of the temple had “crumbled away.”

So while national memory had channeled the passion that fueled the American experiment beyond the founding, by Lincoln’s time, that memory had sufficiently faded such that Americans had lost the underlying attachment to their government. And yet the passions borne of the previous era remained simmering, without any aim toward which to direct their energy. The lack of any meaningful replacement for national memory had thus led to the lawlessness that plagued Lincoln’s era.

Aside from national memory, Lincoln also acknowledged a second bond that a people can develop with their past: one of gratitude. He observed that his generation “toiled not in the acquirement or establishment” of “a system of political institutions,” since their forefathers had done so for them. This left Lincoln’s contemporaries with a debt of gratitude to their ancestors.

Yet Lincoln dismissed gratitude as a replacement for national memory, as it cannot generate the long-term goodwill necessary for national
perpetuation. Gratitude is delicate, and it works only for a time. People may feel they owe something to their benefactors, but at a certain point, a debt of gratitude must be paid off, otherwise it grows akin to slavery and is discarded. Gratitude, moreover, cannot define the life well lived or explain the deeper “why” of any given way of living. It therefore asks the individual to act out of a sense of duty to others long dead without providing meaning in return.

From these reflections, Lincoln came to understand that national perpetuation would require an element of the present—one that could inspire and direct the people’s actions and ambitions toward the preservation of their governing institutions. He proposed that, going forward, Americans should replace the foundational pillars of the republic “with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.” “[C]old, calculating, unimpassioned reason,” in Lincoln’s estimation, could “furnish all the materials for our future support and defence,” creating “a reverence for the constitution and laws.”

Lincoln’s Lyceum Address thus declared that the foundation of any country is the people’s attachment to the government, which promotes observance of the law and leads to stable and enduring political institutions. In the American context, the founders had harnessed popular passions to set the American experiment in motion. The people’s initial attachment to the governing institutions the founders had established survived through the recollections of those who lived through those events. But these memories, and thus the people’s attachment to their institutions, could only fade with time. If the nation were to endure, national memory would need to be replaced with a more lasting source of unity and legitimacy. Lincoln’s answer came in the form of Enlightenment reason based on natural law.

While Lincoln does not say so directly, it had become clear to him that once the rationale for an institution changes, its goals would have to be altered as well. In this new America, then, the goal of every law and institution had to be re-imagined and re-aligned with this new philosophical rationale.

The tension between national memory and reason-based creed is a motif throughout Lincoln’s thought. In 1858, for instance, he applied this idea to immigration, contrasting those “descended by blood from our ancestors” who fought in the Revolution with “men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and
settled here.” These immigrants could not “trace their connection with those days by blood,” and therefore it seemed they would not be able to “make themselves feel that they [were] part of us.” Yet where genealogy and history fail, ideals succeed:

[W]hen [immigrants] look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them.

In this way, America’s creed converts immigrants into true Americans who “have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration…. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together.” So great was the unifying power of America’s founding Enlightenment principles in Lincoln’s eyes that any man who affirmed them could be just as American as any actual descendant of the Revolution.

**The Cause of Perpetuation**

Given the thoroughness of his analysis and the certainty of his conclusion in his Lyceum Address, it may come as a surprise that Lincoln re-opened the topic of national perpetuation in two speeches delivered two decades later, as he was assuming the presidency: his address to the New Jersey State Senate and his first inaugural address.

In his New Jersey Senate speech, President-elect Lincoln stated that he was “exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated.” He repeated the word “perpetuate” in a similar context two more times in the short speech. A few months later, in his first inaugural, Lincoln asserted that he was enter[ing] upon the same task for the brief constitutional term of four years under great and peculiar difficulty. A disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted. I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual.
Lincoln referred to national perpetuation four more times in the address. But he did not appeal to Enlightenment reason in either speech. In fact, he seemed to reject John Locke’s social-contract theory altogether. That theory begins with humans living free in a state of nature and then, through a social contract, agreeing to form a government for the protection of their naturally endowed rights to life, liberty, and property. The Declaration of Independence refers to this as “the consent of the governed.” Had Lincoln truly been a Lockean, he would have accepted the secession of the southern states, whose inhabitants had, as was their natural right, withdrawn their consent to be governed. But of course, Lincoln refused to allow the Confederacy to leave the Union.

Lincoln offered two arguments in support of this refusal. First, he asserted that one of the founders’ primary purposes in “establishing the Constitution was ‘to form a more perfect Union.’” Yet “if destruction of the Union by one or by a part only of the States be lawfully possible, the Union is less perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.” While scholars debate whether Locke would have allowed ancestors to bind their descendants to a government, it is clear that Lincoln was uninterested in the finer points of that question; the Union—the common inheritance of both the northern and southern states—was made to be preserved and could not, therefore, be lawfully abandoned.

Even if we were to suppose that Lincoln employed Enlightenment reason in this argument, he followed up with another justification that is even more obviously in tension with Locke than the first:

I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

There is certainly room for debate among scholars of classical liberalism as to when and under what conditions a social compact can be
renounced. There is, however, no Lockean basis for Lincoln’s assertion that “perpetuity is...the fundamental [and binding] law of all national governments.” In fact, this argument runs directly counter to Locke’s assertion that natural law sometimes demands rejection and withdrawal from existing political compacts.

Following his rejection of the fundamental tenets of Enlightenment thought, Lincoln appeals once again to an idea he had previously discarded: national memory. Speaking directly to the southern states, he asks them to reconsider “before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its...memories.”

At this stage, Lincoln no longer advocates replacing the old, tired foundations of the country with new ones. Instead, he deliberately reaches back to those foundations as the basis for his argument:

The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed, in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured, and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution was “to form a more perfect Union.”

Whereas the younger Lincoln of the Lyceum Address declared the United States must be re-established through reason in order to endure, the more mature Lincoln proposes that national perpetuation rests on a continuing recollection of the formative and defining memories of the nation.

THE ROOTS OF NATIONAL MEMORY

To make sense of how Lincoln’s case for national perpetuity and unity evolved, we must look beyond the Enlightenment principles through which the younger Lincoln framed the American project. Instead, we must turn to the conception of the nation as laid out in the Hebrew Bible.

The Book of Deuteronomy contains Moses’ farewell speeches to Israel, delivered 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. One of the primary concerns he addresses is ensuring that Israel maintains fidelity
to God’s commands—that Israel should not “forget the covenant that the LORD your God concluded with you.” Like Lincoln in his Lyceum Address, Moses understands that political institutions, including the state itself, depend on the underlying attachment of the people to the law. For this reason, he discusses the institutions of judge, king, priest, and prophet after he emphasizes the importance of keeping the law.

Moses addresses the topic of attachment directly when he declares that Israel’s children “will ask you, ‘What do these decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has commanded upon you mean?’” In other words, they will ask what forces secure the people’s continual attachment to the law. And he answers:

[Y]ou shall say to your children, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the LORD freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case.”

This national memory—the recollection of Israel’s origin story—is the pillar that Moses offers to support the people’s perpetual commitment to the law. Thus, in contrast to the Lyceum Address, where Lincoln argued that the short-lived passions of national memory must be replaced with reason, Moses insists that national memory—the formative, defining pillars of the nation—must be maintained in order for the nation to endure.

The function of national memory in Moses’ telling is not to generate passion, but to forge and re-forge the identity of the nation and every individual in each successive generation, for all time. For national memory to serve this identity-forming function, the act of communal recollection must be institutionalized and ritualized. For the Jewish nation, this manifests as the annual Passover Seder—a fulfillment of the requirement that “[i]n each and every generation a person must view himself as though he personally left Egypt.” The Seder celebration and ceremony includes Exodus symbols like matza, bitter herbs, and the
Paschal lamb. Instead of simply remembering the past, the Seder ritual brings the past into the present. Each year, Israel collectively relives its origin story, transforming the past into a shared, living memory.

By approaching the question of national perpetuity in this way, Moses is not ignoring the toll time takes on national memory. On the contrary, he recognizes that over time, memory fades, and the people’s commitment to the law decays in turn. He warns Israel, “[w]hen you have begotten children and children’s children and are long established in the land, should you act wickedly... you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall not long endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out.” To prevent this, Moses proclaims that national memory must not only be preserved; it must be relived so that its vividness and power can endure across time. Through this kind of willful recollection, the supportive pillars of the nation are maintained.

With this framework in mind, it’s worth looking at Lincoln’s description of the Battle of Trenton in his New Jersey Senate speech:

I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New-Jersey. The crossing of the river; the contest with the Hessians; the great hardships endured at that time.

Though Lincoln was born three decades after these events occurred, he speaks of them “fix[ing] themselves upon [his] imagination” — he has mentally relived them himself. Similarly, as Wilfred McClay observed in these pages, the “mystic chords of memory” Lincoln invoked in his first inaugural were said to stretch “from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land” (emphasis added). Historical memories come alive, therefore, only when they are brought into the present.

This kind of social and political “reconstruction of the past” is described at length by 20th-century philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his book On Collective Memory. On the personal level, Halbwachs writes that “[w]e preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them... a sense of our identity is perpetuated.” Indeed, certain dramatic events leave
indelible imprints on a person’s consciousness. Memory and identity are thus inextricably linked to one another. Moses and Lincoln (in his later speeches) applied this link to the collective level, insisting that national memory is vital to the nation’s identity.

An individual’s identity, according to psychologist Erik Erikson, entails “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity … and to act accordingly.” In this way, memories not only shape a person’s present identity, they inform his thinking about how to analyze and respond to future situations as they arise. Memory thus preserves an individual’s identity over time.

The nation, too, ensures the perpetuation of its identity by recalling and continually reliving its memories. This collective remembrance connects each person to the nation, enabling individuals to tie their identities to that of other members of the nation — including those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born but will one day participate in this process of shared recollection. In this way, memory mystically overcomes the natural barriers imposed by the passage of time.

**National Memory and Creed**

This is not to say that the Biblical approach to national perpetuation denies the importance that Lincoln, in his early years, placed on collective creed. Rather, the Bible’s primary emphasis on national memory flows out of a recognition that creedal nationalism has inherent weaknesses — not only when it comes to national preservation, but in the integrity of the creeds themselves.

This weakness is particularly acute when the nation’s creed is articulated and defended on rationalist grounds alone, as Lincoln attempted in his Lyceum Address. Ultimately, this is simply a reflection of the limits of reason to speak to the most fundamental moral and political questions. Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrated these limits in *After Virtue* by examining moral questions like war and abortion. The kinds of moral justifications used to accept or reject these possibilities are typically neither overtly rational nor irrational. Instead, the differing answers to questions about the circumstances under which a life can be destroyed depend on differences in starting axioms — for example, the inviolable sanctity of human life — that can be neither proven nor disproven through reason alone.
Though many classical-liberal defenders of natural rights argued that those rights could be derived through pure reason, the American founders came closer to the truth when they argued that the rights to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” were, within the context of reason, “self-evident” truths — one may either perceive them or not. Such an acknowledgement highlights a significant weakness of Lincoln’s early vision of a nation united by a creed defended primarily through “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason.” Reason alone cannot give life to the pre-rational axioms that lie at the heart of the American creed.

This liability is heightened when, as they eventually must, nations attempt to interpret or apply their axiomatic values amid changing realities, whether technological, cultural, or philosophical. Even if a nation affirms the inherited political and moral axioms of its forbears in toto, it remains difficult to discern how those values ought to be implemented in unanticipated circumstances. In one sense, this is just a natural function of the necessarily limited scope of any single moral or political tradition. On a deeper level, though, this problem is rooted in the cultural contingency of values, language, and symbols. As new realities and cultural ideals become normative — in what Halbwachs described as a process through which new cultural and social forces “prevail and displace the group’s center of gravity” — words, values, and even the most straightforward moral axioms can be transformed. The encounter with a changing milieu warps the meaning of inherited norms, beliefs, and rules in a way that dislodges them from their original intended purpose, leading to fundamental disagreements over how the nation’s values should be implemented. In some instances, as we see in America today, this breakdown can lead to conflicting understandings of the nation’s deepest defining values — and even of the nation itself.

This is why national memory must, precisely for the sake of the nation’s creed, be prioritized ahead of the creed: National memory is essential to anchoring the nation’s principles in their appropriate context. At the moment creeds are composed, they are fundamentally linked with experience — revelatory experience, banal experience, and everything in between. To keep the context of the values firm, those events need to be relived. By continually and collectively re-experiencing its formative memories, the nation is able to preserve something of the context necessary to collectively decipher the normative values, traditions, and laws it has inherited. In that sense, Moses’ call for Israel to
remember its formative national experiences is not a departure from the Bible’s many creedal injunctions—to be holy, to love the stranger, to love and fear God, and so on; it is their indispensable prerequisite.

This understanding is likewise reflected in the subtle shift Lincoln makes in his language over time. Earlier, Lincoln contrasted American history and memory with the principles of the Declaration of Independence. In his New Jersey Senate speech, however, he referred to the “liberties of the people, [which] shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made.” He thus integrates the declaration with experience and history, thereby anchoring it to its original context.

Bringing the past into the present is not the same as living in the past. Similarly, anchoring the nation in its origins is not the same as insisting that it dwell there forever. These goals are not only counterproductive, they are ultimately impossible. For, as Halbwachs correctly observes, “even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu.” He elaborates:

[I]n order for this center to remain in equilibrium, readaptation is required…. The society wishes to adopt these larger and deeper beliefs without entirely rupturing the framework of notions in which it has matured up until this point…. [To do so, society] must persuade its members that they already carry these beliefs within themselves at least partially…. But this is possible only if society does not confront all of the past, if it at least preserves the forms of the past.

What Halbwachs describes here is a framework for gradual change. This is not a clear-cut map for how the change should occur—it is not always evident, for example, which contemporary values could or should be integrated into the national character. Nevertheless, the nation must occasionally evolve, often due to the introduction of some new worthy ideal or to refinements in the understanding of old ones. It must also be prepared to categorically reject changes as well. Most important, the call to adapt must be made not through efforts to reject or forget the past, but by appealing to that past. This is an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one. The “living bond of generations,” to use Halbwachs’s phrase, gives the nation tremendous resilience to adapt its original ideals.
to the ever-changing present. But the nation can only mature in relation to its original, defining experience and commitments.

This is exactly the kind of evolutionary dynamism Lincoln embraced in his effort to preserve the American nation. His Gettysburg Address offers one of the best examples of this approach. Lincoln famously begins the speech by looking to America’s founding experience and ideals to propel the nation’s maturation and development: “Fourscore and seven years ago,” he declares, “our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In this framing, America’s founding principles guide the nation along the path to gradually becoming a better, fuller, truer version of itself.

Going one step further, Lincoln immortalizes the heroism and sacrifice of those who fought and died at Gettysburg. Now fully cognizant of the tremendous power of collective recollection, Lincoln adds to the national memory that of the fallen soldiers, binding their struggle and sacrifice to a new understanding of the nation’s creed:

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

**Reclaiming Our Shared Past**

In 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute released a paper highlighting the abysmal state of historical literacy among young Americans. The study found, for example, that college freshmen had a better grasp of U.S. history and civics than college seniors. Worse even than the lack of knowledge are the revisionist attempts by progressive historians to reframe the entirety of America’s history through the lens of power and oppression. Given these efforts, it’s not surprising that so many young
Americans find very little of value to affirm, let alone identify with, in their nation’s history. Nor is it surprising that the American people are increasingly divided over the meaning of the nation’s values.

But simply restoring a more robust teaching of history will not suffice to rectify the problem. If history is to fill the role imagined by Moses and Lincoln, it must become more than the study and analysis of fact, and it must also become more than a culture inspired by past glories; it must become *lived* memory — both personal and national.

This requires proudly retelling the American story, in each and every home and community. In recalling their shared history, Americans will need to act as if they themselves fought for their freedom. Every citizen must feel that America’s foundational story is alive and personal. They must understand the tyranny their forbears experienced and the significance of the liberty they fought for. Only an American identity constructed in this way — one that brings the spirit of the founding era into the present — can provide the critically needed restoration of America’s national purpose and unity.