

What Does it Mean to be an American Citizen?
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We are here today because the success of any democracy is determined by the participation of its citizens.

Lincoln asked whether a nation devoted to the values of liberty, equality, justice and opportunity “so conceived...can long endure.”

In these words, he told us a truth about our democracy – that its survival is never guaranteed, and that its success demands wisdom, action and even vigilance from American citizens.

Thus, I focus my remarks today on the basic question: what does it mean to be an American citizen?

What do we owe?

First, what do we – as American citizens – owe?

We begin with gratitude. As many have said, the joy of being an American is the joy of freedom and opportunity.

We have been bequeathed freedom, justice and opportunity from the deeds and commitments – even the spilled blood – of Americans who came before us.

We did not earn the inheritance. This nation of unequaled wealth and power, of freedom and opportunity, was given to us.

But no matter how rich and powerful it becomes, America is not – and never will be – a finished project. It is always aborning. You and I are handed a work in progress – one that can evolve for good or for ill.

American democracy makes a wager on its citizens. The deal is simple – with freedom comes obligation, with liberty comes duty. If that deal is not kept, democracy is threatened.

Lincoln said at Gettysburg: “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.” He spoke of a “new birth of freedom” so that government of, by and for the people would not perish.

You and I must learn – and we must teach our young – the words we live by: the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the other grand documents of American history. And we must learn and teach about the institutions that bring life and permanence to these words and deeds so familiar to us, so that they may fulfill Lincoln’s charge.

Democracy is not fixed like a monarchy. It is dynamic. Democracy reflects the will – and above all the action – of each generation of American citizens.

So what do we owe? As Americans we owe a profound debt of gratitude for the actions of those who preceded us, and we owe those who will follow an America that is even greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

Why are we concerned?

But I am concerned, as I know you are. Why are we concerned?

We are concerned because too many Americans lack a basic understanding of our democracy – our institutions, our representative democracy, our obligation to those who came before, and what each of us can and must do to preserve the blessings of liberty.

A multitude of surveys confirm our concerns. But we don't even need to look at surveys or statistics to know that political participation and civic engagement is down basically across the board. People are voting less; paying less attention to their civic responsibility; ignoring the great lessons of the American experiment; participating less and complaining more.

There is a sense, particularly among many young people, that being an American citizen is no big deal, with no obligation attached to it – an endeavor not particularly worthy of their time and talent. I know of young people in Indiana who – when asked about the meaning of Memorial Day – respond by saying that it is the day that pools are opened, or the occasion for the Indianapolis 500 auto race.

All of us are aware of a disconnect between people and their elected representatives. People do not trust them. People think they do the bidding of powerful interests. People think they are not relevant to their day-to-day lives. People think that citizenship is hollow.

You and I are concerned because we know that if we are apathetic, passive, and cynical about our democracy, then we will invite leaders who abuse power. There is an old observation: a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves.

You and I are concerned because we stand on a precipice. If American citizens increasingly become disengaged, then the entire American democratic enterprise is at risk. Indeed, sometimes I wonder about whether our democracy can continue as we know it if civic participation continues to decline as it has.

Why engage?

Why should you and I and others engage in civic activity?

We have plenty of important things to worry about – doing our jobs, paying our bills, taking care of our families. No doubt, these private interests are civic virtues in their own right.

We are good – in this country – at speaking out for and protecting our individual interest.

But all of us can benefit from giving at least some of our attention to advancing the public interest, or – as the founding fathers called it – the common good.

Look around you. Many things need to be done in your community and country. Perhaps you are upset by the actions of your representative. Or the school that your children attend. Or the quality of your health care. Or the conditions of the roads that you drive on. Or even our nation's foreign policy.

Don't misunderstand me. Tending your own business and the affairs of your family is important. But civic engagement is your way of influencing for the better your neighborhood, community, state and nation. If you and I become involved our cynicism will dissipate and our morale improve. We may even see life become better, richer, and fuller for our fellow citizens.

I know people who vote, walk out of the booth, and say and believe that their civic duty has been fully discharged. Voting is important – but not enough. Do you know who does not disengage when the voting is done? Interest groups. They begin their work the day after an election – they know that's when the real work begins. They know it and so should the rest of us.

If you are upset about the influence exerted by special interests; if you are upset about the actions of a public official; if you are upset about the condition of your local school; even if you are upset about a pothole in front of your house – civic engagement is a way of taking action to make your corner of the world better. What do we have on our agenda that is more important?

The key to good governance is simple: it is to hold power accountable. Civic engagement does just that. We engage because it improves our democracy, and it is the only way to make our government responsive to the people.

What can we do?

How, then, do we engage?

If you ask them, most Americans want to be better people living in better communities, a better state, and a better nation. Often, they want to become involved but don't know how – don't know where to go, whom to talk to, what to do.

Thus the job of civic education is not complete if we teach only its importance; we must be shown how to engage, how to participate, how to get off the sidelines and into the action.

This may seem overwhelming at first. But I like the attitude of the builder who said: "I cannot solve the world's problems, but I can help build this house."

A constituent of mine was a diabetic. He approached me one day many years ago because he had no idea what was in the food on sale at the grocery store, and his health depended upon it.

But he did more than just talk to me. He spoke around the community to whomever would listen; visited and wrote letters to all kinds of officials – county commissioners, state legislators, other members of Congress. Thanks to him, and many people of like mind and

action, consumers now have meaningful labels on the food that they buy.

We would all like to engage to resolve the big problem. Fixing health care. Saving social security. Changing the tax code. Defending our nation against its enemies. Some of us have those opportunities, but most of us don't.

All of us can engage most effectively through small, incremental changes. A school is rebuilt. Ramps for the handicapped are carved into street corners. A safety signal goes up in a dangerous intersection. A worthy, young disadvantaged student enters medical school. A young woman steps into the world with more opportunity than her mother.

These are not insignificant examples. They save and improve lives and communities. The actions of my constituent and countless American citizens like him made many American lives healthier. This is the wellspring of our American democracy – countless small actions that make a better nation.

We engage by looking around us, seeing something that needs fixing, and doing something about it:

- We can stay more informed about issues in our own communities, as well as the issues of the state and nation.
- We can run for elective office or work for candidates of our choice.
- We can vote in elections and hold each of our representatives accountable – from the president on down to a town council or commissioner.
- We can join institutions of service – be it the peace corps, the armed services, Americorps, or local uniformed services.
- We can volunteer for charitable causes and organizations.
- We can join the sometimes messy, rough and tumble dialogue of democracy by writing letters to local papers or elected officials, asking questions or advocating positions.
- We can give speeches or ask questions why things cannot be better across the street or across the world.
- We can organize petition drives or letter writing campaigns.
- We can join – or begin – organizations that reflect our views and enlarge our collective voice.

If you know your community – the problems that need addressing; the different kinds of people (not just the people like you); the issues; who is in charge; who has the power to get a message out; who can assemble people together – I can assure you, you will engage. Set goals;

craft messages; organize; and – when successful – share the credit.

Civic engagement is the greatest antidote for cynicism; it is also a great - maybe the best – lesson of democracy.

When we become engaged in community life we no longer feel distant from the centers of power and decision-making. We come to understand our own communities, and appreciate how we can influence change. Perhaps most important, we gain an appreciation for the hard work of democracy – how to understand different points of view and forge a consensus behind a course of action towards a solution in a complex, busy and diverse society.

If we engage, we lessen the distance between ourselves and those who govern. And we gain understanding and appreciation for our country that can only make it – and the ongoing experiment of American democracy – stronger.

Conclusion

You and I believe that democracy is the most worthy form of government. And we know that democracy cannot thrive – indeed, cannot exist – without the active participation of citizens.

So we must get into our bones the ideas of representative democracy: the consent of the governed, the institutions of democracy in our nation, the necessity of participation, and the avenues for action that are open to all of us.

Our engagement brings out the very best within us. Our nation demands not only our competence, but also our passion.

President Kennedy's words resonate through the years: "In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course... Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

I cherish the citizen who says: I belong here; I have a role to play; I have a contribution to make.

What does it mean to be an American citizen? It means that we are blessed to be part of this nation; we are concerned about a shortage of civic awareness and engagement; and we should act to effect meaningful change and accountable government through countless avenues for civic action. Above all, it means we are responsible for tending to our own democracy, making it work for all and transmitting it to our children better than we inherited it.

You accept the responsibility of an American citizen. Fortunately there are many more Americans like you – but not enough. Our charge is to spread this message anew to all Americans.