

The American Creed

By: Andrew Kil

I believe in the United States of America, as a government of the people, by the people, for the people; whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed; a democracy in a republic; a sovereign Nation of many sovereign States; a perfect union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes. I therefore believe it is my duty to my country to love it, to support its Constitution, to obey its laws, to respect its flag, and to defend it against all enemies.

These immortal words from William Tyler Page, a public servant that served this country for over 60 years, comprise what we now know as the American Creed. It embodies the basic tenets of the Constitution, which has been the enduring cornerstone of America, allowing us to remain united and committed to its underlying promise; the promise of a nation, where the destiny of its populace is not vested within the hands of a monarch or dictator; but instead, where the keys to our destiny reside in us, the people. These words call us to a purpose greater than our own individual needs and wants.

Undoubtedly, being an American guarantees us unparalleled rights and privileges. Yet, as citizens, in addition to being afforded such rights, we have our own civic duty to conduct ourselves and meet certain higher principles. We should celebrate, cherish, and honor our veterans, neighbors, and ultimately, fellow citizens. For the sake of the common good, everyone has made a sacrifice, whether it be on a battlefield, or in our neighborhoods, towns, and streets.

It is our responsibility as citizens to ensure that the Constitution and Bill of Rights are secured and upheld, whether it be through complying with mandatory obligations like with paying taxes, performing jury duty, and obeying laws; or through voluntary obligations, like with exercising our right to vote, staying informed about current affairs, and contributing to the common good. Obviously, the mandatory obligations are simply a given, but when we focus on the voluntary civic responsibilities, these factors truly and directly relate to our democracy. As Lyndon B. Johnson, our 36th President once said: "Our citizens - naturalized or native-born - must also seek to refresh and improve their knowledge of how our government operates under the Constitution and how they can participate in it. Only in this way can they assume the full responsibilities of citizenship and make our government more truly of, by, and for the people."

In particular, the exercising of one's right and duty to vote, and more importantly, defending the sovereignty of all the people, from which our government derives its powers from, are the most consequential and sacred duties we have as patriots.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his work *Democracy in America*: “In that land the great experiment was to be made by civilized man, of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis; and it was there, for the first time, that theories hitherto unknown, or deemed impracticable, were to exhibit a spectacle for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past.”

Tocqueville and many others had lived in a world dominated by long-standing monarchies, so a system in which citizens governed themselves was considered frankly revolutionary. It was the delicate task of our Founding Fathers to carefully curate, design, and ultimately bring into fruition the great experiment. The Founding Fathers understood this momentous task, which is why they heavily pondered with questions regarding the extent and manner of voting. In the end, our Founding Fathers understood that this great experiment would need to be refined and adapted to changing circumstances.

A great example of this phenomenon that we ought to consider is Tennessee, the 36th state that would consider ratifying the 19th Amendment, which would grant females the right to vote. In the Tennessee General Assembly, the motion was introduced, with the state senate forwarding the motion to ratify, but the state house of representatives was stuck in a tie. It was a legislator named Harry T. Burn who casted the tie-breaking vote in favor of ratifying the 19th Amendment. Harry Burn was reviled by anti-suffragists, with slanderous charges and accusations being expressed towards his character. Yet, Burn stood firm by his decision, expressing the reasoning behind his decision in the House Journal as quoted: “I believe in full suffrage as a right”; “I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify; I know that a mother’s advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification.”

It was correct for Burn to listen to his mother, as we all should. Mothers are vital pillars to our personal lives, helping to instill within us not only a sense of duty to our families, but to our community as well.

It is the duty of any citizen to defend the rights of their fellow peers. Harry T. Burn was a principled man, living up to the ideals of the American Creed, and exhibiting courage to allow for the expansion of voting rights. John F. Kennedy’s classic text *Profiles in Courage* reaffirms Burn’s action: “A man does what he must — in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers, and pressures — and that is the basis of all human morality.”

It was vital for previously disenfranchised groups to finally have a voice, since it would make our democracy live up to being the “great experiment,” where race, class, and gender don’t

prevent one from using the ballot. It would allow for “We The People” to finally consent to our governors, living up to popular sovereignty. It would allow for “We The People” to elect our representatives, with no voices left silenced. John Lewis, a former US Senator and Civil Rights activist, would perfectly sum up the significance of voting in this statement: “The right to vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool or instrument we have in a democratic society.”

Yet, in some cases, political crises and turmoil challenge our great way of life.

The Storming of the Capitol on January 6th proved to be a challenge to our “great experiment.” Mitch McConnell explained in a session of Congress: “My colleagues, nothing before us proves illegality anywhere near the massive scale—the massive scale—that would have tipped the entire election...The voters, the courts and the states have all spoken. They’ve all spoken. If we overrule them, it would damage our republic forever.”

It was a short statement, but it perfectly encapsulates the values perpetuated by the American Creed.

Barbara Jordan, who served as a Representative of Texas, would concur with this sentiment: “A government is invigorated when each of us is willing to participate in shaping the future of this nation. . . . Let each person do his or her part. If one citizen is unwilling to participate, all of us are going to suffer. For the American idea, though it is shared by all of us, is realized in each one of us.”

With each election, people realize within themselves the American idea in different ways. For some, certain electoral outcomes have and will continue to bring about great pain, anguish, and even anger that could manifest itself in destructive ways, which applies to both sides of the political spectrum. Yet, as American citizens, we cannot give in to these emotions, ceasing political participation, and ignoring our civic duty to the higher ideals of our Constitution.

As Theodore Roosevelt Jr., our 26th President, once said: “Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty...”

It is worth the effort, pain, and difficulty to preserve our democracy. It will be tenuous, but previous generations have had civil wars and world wars, and in the end, all made this consequential choice. So, for the sake of our children, grandchildren, and for the future

generations that will inhabit this great land, let us heed the wise actions of our Founding Fathers. Let us heed the wise words of our ancestors, forefathers, and mothers in ultimately saying yes, let this “great experiment” continue once again!