

*The Cause of All Mankind: The Relevance of a Shared Task in a Divided Era*

Writing from France in 1777, Benjamin Franklin saw that even Europeans shared the American appetite for independence as liberty expanded into “the Cause of all Mankind.” However, the shared “Task” of a fledgling America is lost to the ages in today’s deeply divided political sphere. Instead of dismissing our divisions as a product of the times, Americans must look upon the opposition with compassion and think critically about contrasting viewpoints to work towards a goal sought since Franklin’s time: to improve America for the common good.

In Franklin’s America, marked by lofty ideals to correct rankling injustices, colonists swept aside their political differences to achieve the collective goal of independence from Great Britain. Though some still sought to maintain ties with Britain, they were far outnumbered by those who desired independence (Brannon). Inspired by this shared “Task,” a wide range of colonists united to fight for America’s freedom. Both white and Black men fought in militias, women worked in military camps, and men of politics formed the Continental Congress, writing their way to freedom. Even in an America with glaring inequalities by today’s standards—indigenous people forced from their land, women afforded few rights, and legal slavery—a desire for liberty was woven into the very fabric of society, allowing Americans to unite under “the Cause of all Mankind.”

Yet, nearly two-and-a-half centuries later, harsh rhetoric and a polarized political scene negate any unified effort to maintain America’s founding ideals. Politics have rarely before divided Americans as they do today. But rather than uniting to resolve our injustices as in Franklin’s time, we sink lower, insulting the opposite party and refusing to acknowledge their opinions. A study from the Pew Research Center found that “growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats say members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, and close-minded than other Americans.” The percentage of Republicans and Democrats who believe members of the opposite party possess these traits has nearly doubled from 2016 to 2022. Nevertheless, Americans are keenly aware of the divide that torments us. PBS NewsHour reporter Judy Woodruff remarked: “In all my years of covering politics, I don’t remember a time like this, when people not only hold different views, but [...] can’t stand those who disagree with them.” In a quest

for righteousness, Americans have forgotten a vital lesson from our history, demonstrated in Franklin’s Revolutionary War: unity propels us to success. However, given the polarity of today’s political sphere, regaining the unity of 1770s America is improbable. Instead, individual Americans must embody compassion and critical thought to understand the opposing party and bridge the gap between each other.

Closing the political chasm in America first requires change within ourselves before we can extend such values to our larger communities. Several organizations created initiatives to provide Americans with strategies to address political divides. The nonpartisan organization Starts With Us created the Polarization Detox Challenge in collaboration with Peter T. Coleman, Ph.D. by mapping daily exercises into a four-week plan with a different focus each week, such as “Address[ing] your own divisive habits,” or “reintroduc[ing] honesty and tolerance within your own political in-group.” Living Room Conversations is a similar organization that provides free guides for thoughtful conversations on over 150 topics, including “polarization” and “political peace-building.” These initiatives are somewhat akin to Franklin’s efforts at moral perfection, where he challenged himself to embody the thirteen virtues that created a perfect individual. Each of these three approaches focuses on making small-scale changes to exist as a better person for the surrounding world, whether politically or personally. Although the Polarization Detox Challenge and Living Room Conversations may seem relatively insignificant, a change in America’s split political climate starts with each of us. If we all work to understand other viewpoints, compassion, not contempt, can govern our political interactions. Then, Americans can focus on our collective desire to better our country, regardless of political party.

Though Franklin’s observation of “the Cause for all Mankind” is relevant in his era of a collective American “Task,” current political divides erode the unity we once cherished. The polarized political sphere in America does not permit collaboration across political parties, and working toward a collective goal is rare. To re-establish a national unity comparable to Franklin’s, we must first heal our hostile and polar political attitudes within ourselves. Then, regardless of the parties that divide us, we can all work together for resounding success: creating a better America.

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