

GUEST COLUMN: A nation worth striving for: The unfinished story of democracy

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To my fellow citizens:

A birthday is more than a measurement of time passed; it is an audit of the soul. In the introduction to “Democracy in America (1835),” Alexis de Tocqueville noted that he traveled to our shores to study the “image of democracy itself” — not merely its laws, but its inclinations, prejudices, and passions. He sought to discern “what we have to fear or to hope from its progress.” Today, that inquiry remains our most vital inheritance. A nation, much like a living organism, cannot survive by resting upon its laurels.

As the philosopher John Dewey later observed, democracy is more than a set of legal protections; it is a “way of life” that must be constantly enacted in our attitudes toward one another. For Dewey, democracy “begins in conversation,” and its true home is the neighborly community.”

America is a relatively young protagonist on the world stage, yet its trajectory has been nothing short of a spectacle. By any historical standard, the economic dynamism and political liberty achieved here is unprecedented. We have transformed a vast wilderness into a global engine of innovation. To truly understand the “image of democracy,” we must investigate the shadows as well as the light.

Every nation has its share of historical transgressions. For America, these are the enduring legacies of slavery and the systemic inequities that often shadow our progress. We must grapple with the tensions of “hyper-individualism” and “unbridled capitalism.” Our greatness is not found in the accumulation of wealth alone, but in our capacity for self-correction.

The American story is often distilled into the phrase “a nation of immigrants.” This land offered a sanctuary for talent and a laboratory for hard work; in return, those who arrived — whether fleeing tyranny or seeking bread — invested their very essence into the national project. This mutual exchange created a unique cultural alchemy, forging a work ethic and a spirit of resilience that remains our most potent resource.

Our institutions of higher learning serve as the modern cathedrals of this spirit. They are magnets for global genius, producing knowledge that alleviates suffering and expands the horizons of human capability. It is why we remain the “envy of the world.” Yet, we must remember that our architectural marvels, our technological dominance, and our formidable military are merely the “artifacts” of our values. We do not strive for the sake of the stone or the steel; we strive for the sake of the people who give them meaning.

People travel to other great nations to admire the past—to walk through the ruins of empires and read the literature of eras long gone. But people come to America to build the future. American identity is not anchored in what was, but in the relentless pursuit of what *can be*.

When in 1969, the physicist Robert Wilson was testifying before Congress regarding funding for the National Accelerator Laboratory, he was asked whether the particle accelerator would contribute to the defense of the nation. He admitted it would have no direct impact on our military strength, but concluded: “It has only to do with the respect with which we regard one another, the dignity of men, our love of culture... it has to do with: Is it a country worth defending?”

Let us etch that sentiment into our collective memory. Our strength does not lie solely in the height of skyscrapers or the reach of our weapons, but in the vibrancy of our local libraries, schools, Southern Oregon University, the integrity of our town halls, and the justice of our social bonds right here in the Rogue Valley. We are a nation worth striving for because we are a community that refuses to be finished. Let us continue the work of making our corner of the country not just a place to live, but a place profoundly worth cherishing.

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