

Garland County Democrats — September 20, 2018

As our First Lady, Michelle Obama, is famous for saying, "when they go low, we go high." One of the ways Democrats go high is through our commitment to patriotic American values.

Patriotism is one of the most revered and misunderstood aspects of our political life. With the onset of home-stretch election campaigning, we can expect to hear constant references to patriotism, along with claims as to who is more patriotic than whom. John McCain, in his final communication, warned that patriotism is not the same as partisan tribalism.

It's important to distinguish patriotism from symbols of patriotism. There are parallels to this. Pledging fidelity in your wedding vows is not the same as actually being faithful. Or, signing a contract is not the same as actually doing the work or paying for the work. These bear repeating in the Age of Trump. Similarly, there's a distinction between actual patriotism and the symbols of it.

Patriotism can be defined as "having or expressing devotion to and vigorous support for one's country." It is sometimes listed as synonymous with "loyalty," though there is an important distinction. You can be loyal to your spouse, your alma mater, your favorite NBA team, your political party, and so on. Patriotism, however, is, specifically, loyalty to your country.

But what is your country in this context? I would suggest it is not a name or a geographical location but a set of ideals that define it, that make it special. Sometimes your country lives up to those ideals and sometimes it falls short. It is interesting that some people like to define patriotism in terms of the expression, "My country, right or wrong." Perfect size for a bumper sticker. Those who ground their patriotism in this phrase always neglect the second half of it, as originally expressed by Interior Secretary Carl Shurtz in 1872: "My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right." I would suggest this is the bedrock of patriotism: a commitment to the realization of our national ideals. These ideals should not be confused with the symbols created to represent them: the flag,

the national anthem, and the pledge of allegiance. It is the fundamental ideals that matter.

So, what are the ideals that define America? Fortunately, these were laid out by Mr. Jefferson in our Declaration of Independence.

"All men are created equal." Today, we bridle a little over the exclusion of women in this statement, but the original, implicit understanding was more limited than that. "White, male property owners" was more accurate though less poetic. The important point here is the disavowal of traditional distinctions by hereditary social ranks: monarchs, aristocrats, and commoners. That was the revolutionary, leveling intent. And over the course of our social and political evolution (I guess it's safe to say "evolution" in this room)—we've seen a continual expansion of the equality umbrella: addressing gender, race and ethnicity, religion, economic status, sexual orientation, and so forth. For over two hundred years, we have moved ever closer to realizing the view that "all humans are created equal." Creating a more perfect union .

Every stage in this broadening of equality, however, has produced a backlash, as President Obama discussed recently. Some men have felt diminished by the inclusion of women. Some whites have felt diminished by the inclusion of non-whites. This resistance is perfectly understandable within a belief that power is a zero-sum game. If you gain, I lose.

But in fact, power is not a zero-sum game. Power can be created from nothing as we've seen repeatedly in social movement after social movement. The Labor Union movement, the Civil Rights movement, anti-war movements, Indivisible. Consider the high school students from Parkland, Florida. Margaret Mead may have said it best: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

So white, male property-owners haven't lost their right to vote; they've just lost exclusivity, dominance, and, perhaps, the feeling of superiority. The feeling of loss is very real, though not always logical. I loved the post on social media, saying, "If Mexicans are all rapists and drug dealers—and they are taking your job—what exactly do you do for a living?"

So, I would suggest that a robust commitment to the full meaning of human equality is the cornerstone of American patriotism. And the current administration has done its best to divide us into the worthy and the unworthy. In the words of *Animal Farm*, some pigs are more equal than others. That view is directly opposed to the fundamental American value of equality and must be set right.

As you recall, the Declaration of Independence continues to assert the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Like the assertion of equality, these were radical ideas at the time. But how are they reflected in modern America?

The assertion that "Black Lives Matter" is a reminder that the right to life is not necessarily inalienable. Not equally so. Every time an unarmed, Black person is shot and killed by police or by someone "standing their ground," a fundamental American ideal is tragically challenged. No wonder NFL players and others regard "taking a knee" to be a patriotic action, a fulfillment of the pledge: "when wrong, to set it right."

This inalienable right to life was reflected in President Obama's commitment that every American, rich or poor, should have adequate health care, as we find in all other developed nations. But as we saw, this commitment to a fundamental American value was, nevertheless, controversial, and it remains so today.

The inalienable "right to life"—to continue using a familiar, though usually abused phrase—is similarly challenged when a group of old, white men force women into back alleys to risk their lives, seeking unsafe abortions. Refusing women the right to control their own bodies can also be seen as violating the inalienable right to liberty.

The First Amendment to the Constitution spells out some aspects of American liberty in guarantees that included freedom of religion, free speech, and a free press. The Trump administration has been unusually crude in treading on these ideals. Freedom of religion evidently does not include Muslims. Freedom of expression is denied in many ways, including the taking a knee in protest.

And the Fourth Estate, which has been defended by every previous administration—even those suffering most at its hands—is now proclaimed “an enemy of the people.” What a chilling expression to hear in America. We’ve grown accustomed to hearing it from Russia, China, North Korea, and banana republics, but it has no place in America. That statement is blatantly unpatriotic. The president and those who support him should be ashamed for expressing such an unAmerican view.

The rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness is still routinely denied the LGBTQ community. Shortly after Trump assumed office, I asked a married, gay friend if he was going to be allowed to stay married—hoping I was being facetious. He responded, “I only hope I can stay gay.” Some days, that seems like a real question, as homophobic bigotry runs wild—ironically masquerading as “religious freedom.” (If your religion is focussed on who you should hate, you really need to consider a new religion.)

To be sure, Donald Trump did not invent homophobia, nor racial and religious bigotry. It has been there all along like a cancer lurking within our American body.

But Trump has modeled, nursed, and blessed the worst in us.

And the Attorney General's renewed campaign against marijuana is a big "JUST KIDDING" regarding the pursuit of happiness.

I could go on, but I don't want to depress you any more than necessary. The simple fact is that this November's election is a referendum on the promises that have made America special throughout its evolving, improving history. We are currently experiencing one of those periodic retrograde movements in a much longer history. As Martin Luther King, Jr., remarked, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

If we reflect on the history of the United States and the rest of humanity, the clear trend is away from bigotry and violence and in the direction of acceptance and harmony. Sometimes it's hard to get that, since the process is far from complete. The most prominent headlines report school shootings, terrorist movements, the endless wars in the Middle East, and the like. But take a moment to recall a few decades

ago, when 57,000 Americans and countless Vietnamese were killed in that war. Prior to that, two world wars took millions of military and civilian lives. The Middle Ages and the Crusades were not all that peaceful.

And as Steven Pinker, points out in "The Better Angels of Our Nature," a distressingly high percentage of prehistoric skeletons seem to have died by having their heads bashed in. Not a lot of kumbaya during cave times.

In this sense, history is clearly on our side. The danger in that recognition, however, is that we may be lulled into lying back and waiting for the good times to roll. But that's not the way it works. The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice because truly moral people make it their purpose to bend the arc toward justice, to seek an ever-greater realization of the ideals I've been discussing.

This November, I think, the so-called Blue Wave is our best hope for a restoration of fundamental American ideals. I do not mean to suggest that all Democrats and all Progressives are good and all Republicans and all Conservatives are bad, though that seems more nearly

true than any time since the McCarthy Era of the 1950s.

Taking a broader and more hopeful view, I look forward to a time when Liberals can debate others who are Conservative with integrity. I think that columnists like David Brooks and David Frum demonstrate that there are elements in Conservatism that should be considered in seeking American solutions to American problems, as then-Senator Obama told the 2004 Democratic Convention. Ultimately, I think we need a Red, White, and Blue wave—but Blue needs to be the focus this November.

As we work toward the coming election, I'm not sure how much we can gain from criticizing Donald Trump. If some people are still blind to his moral degeneracy, I doubt that we will be able to change their minds. For now, we need a powerful Blue Tsunami to repair the damage done by the Trump administration and to restore a full commitment to the ideals that have always made America special.

Nonetheless, Trump is hardly blameless in the degeneration of American public life. I'd remind you of

an outrageous event in June, 2013, when a teenager, Ethan Couch, drove drunk into a crowd of pedestrians, killing four of them. He ultimately escaped serious punishment by introducing a new concept: affluenza.

Couch's attorney argued that Couch had been raised in wealth and was never taught basic moral principles of right and wrong. There were many reasons to be upset with that excuse and its success in court. Some of us wondered what an affluenza-infected teenager would be like as an adult.

Now, we know. Donald Trump, Scott Priuit, Steve Mnuchin, and the others populating the Trump swamp give ample evidence of affluenza all grewed up. For example, while many of us were watching our 401k's become 201k's during the Bush Economic Miracle, Steve Mnuchin took that opportunity to buy up problematic mortgages, evicting as many as 36,000 families, and reselling their homes for a substantial profit. Mnuchin is estimated to have earned over \$10 million from his foreclosure fiesta. When Hillary charged Trump with evading taxes during one of their presidential debates, he responded that just proved how smart he was.

In sum, we find ourselves at a time when the traditional American values have sunk to one of their all-time low points. The barbarians are not only at the gate, they have seized control of the government. November 2018 is a critical moment in history, a time for patriots to reclaim all that has made America special in history.

I have little expertise in political campaigning, but I'd like to make a suggestion for you to consider. I think we would do better to stress the things we are FOR more than those we are AGAINST. Obviously I am not above criticizing Mr. Trump, but I think we need to handle that issue carefully. There are, as we all know, people who still defend Trump, and the temptation is to bury those folks under facts and logic that prove, to us, how bad he is. I'm afraid this will rarely change anyone's mind and will, instead, make it harder for them to admit they were tragically wrong. It would be better to leave them alone, making it easier for them to quietly abandon Trump on their own, without feeling stupid. Or alternatively, we might say we can understand why they voted for him—better health insurance for less money, for example—but it now looks as though he lied to us about that. Or he said he would

make Mexico pay for a wall along our Southern border, but he was apparently just joking.

Bottom line, we should heed the bucolic wisdom of President Lyndon Johnson, who advised: don't mud wrestle with pigs; everyone gets dirty and the pigs love it.

Donald Trump won't be on the ballot in November, of course, but his enablers in the Congress and in state and local government will. We should confront them with our commitment to fundamental American values and send them home to spend more time with their families.

Here are just a few of the positive issues we might focus on:

- ◎ Restoring the economic well-being of the middle class
- ◎ Restoring the safety net programs protecting our most vulnerable
- ◎ Assuring every American is guaranteed quality health care.

- ⦿ Assure an affordable, quality education for all students
- ⦿ Restore protections for our environment
- ⦿ Restore international relationship with our real allies
- ⦿ Protect our electoral and governmental systems from enemies foreign and domestic
- ⦿ Stamp out all forms of voter suppression
- ⦿ Insure a woman's right to control her own body
- ⦿ Insist that all human beings deserve, equally, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

I will not presume to tell you what you should do. Each of us must find the ways we can best serve this crusade to restore American values. That's what patriots would do and, from now until November, we can do no less. As Michelle's husband said, "In the face of impossible odds, people who love this country can change it."