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*Heroic Leadership*

## Keeping America Great

### *Two Foundation Blocks and Our Current Challenge*

If the American experiment is to continue the current generations of Americans will need to draw upon and model American Greatness. American Greatness rests on two historical foundation blocks and we are now challenged to carry it forward by taking on the big tough issues we face.

That means drawing upon and honoring the American Greatness with which we have been blessed and entrusted – and drawing upon courage and perseverance to model the American Greatness called for now. We must avoid the two natural pitfalls of being stuck in the past or being afraid of the future. We must move forward, not back.

**"America was not built  
on fear. America was  
built on courage, on  
imagination, and an  
unbeatable  
determination to do the  
job at hand."**

PRESIDENT  
HARRY S. TRUMAN

### **Why Does “American Greatness” Matter?**

It matters because the picture we hold of American Greatness affects how we think about America, how we feel about America, and how we act. What is American Greatness? What is the picture or vision we hold of American Greatness? How do we act to model and carry

it forward to honor our past and continue striving to fully realize the original American vision for all Americans?

America is the great experiment in democracy, now almost 250 years old. American democracy is not a given. It is not a sure thing. Being a democracy and being citizens of a democracy is not easy, particularly in a world that is disturbingly hostile to democracy. Creating and maintaining the institutions and processes that support a democracy takes courage and a relentless commitment, a surprising amount of time, perseverance, and wisdom.

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## I.

### Overview

#### The Two Foundation Blocks on Which We Stand & the Challenge We Now Face

American Greatness rests on two foundation blocks and we are now challenged to carry it forward by modeling it through taking on the big tough issues we face. That means drawing upon and honoring the American Greatness with which we have been blessed and entrusted, drawing upon to model the American Greatness called for now.

#### **Foundation Block #1 – Our Founding** **The courage to establish a new type of nation**

The earliest foundation block was America's founding as a new type of country with new values, forms of government, and citizen power and responsibility. The founding of

America wasn't perfect, but it was a game-changer for the world. Americans had to make the commitment and sacrifices to fight a war against the strongest military in the world to bring the new nation into being. And they had to find the courage to go into an unknown future with no guarantees of success.

**“America is much more than a geographical fact. It is a political and moral fact — the first community in which men set out in principle to institutionalize freedom, responsible government, and human equality.”**

**ADLAI E. STEVENSON**

## **Foundation Block #2 – Our Historical Trajectory The persistence and resilience to “hold the course”**

The second foundation block is the fact that, although it has had a mixed history of progress and backsliding, America has been working at realizing the founding principles and values ever since its beginning. It has been a relentless challenge with the right trajectory, a disappointing pace, and lots of small and large ups and downs – progress and back-sliding, but no quitting. America has also maintained a model of democracy for almost 250 years and rallied to counter fundamental threats such as WWII and the cold war.



## **Our Challenge Now - “Answering the Call” to take on the toughest challenges**

American Greatness now rests on our willingness to continue on the path to realize the original vision and expand it to include all Americans. It depends on our willingness and ability to take on the big internal and external issues we face, such as of climate change, racism, the social/political polarization of America, the health of rural America, countering the dictatorships that would like to take America down, etc.



**American Greatness is not conferred. It is constantly earned.** We will either honor our founding and the generations that have persevered to model American Greatness by taking on the big challenges that call for it - or we will fall prey to the ever-present fear, uncertainty, and doubt - and retreat from the challenges. The challenge is to continue the trajectory – moving forward, not backward – acting from courage and our “larger selves” vs. acting from fear and anxiety and our “smaller selves.” We will either carry American Greatness forward or we will let it slip away.

## II. Who this is Written For

This is written for the critical mass of people required to keep America great by taking on the big tough challenges we now face. This is not for everyone. Not everyone identifies with American Greatness. It is written:

1. For people who realize that we, the current generations, are responsible for carrying American Greatness forward vs. retreating into the past or standing on the sidelines. – and must draw upon and model American Greatness to do so.
2. For Americans who understand that America is a grand experiment, and its future is not guaranteed - it requires exceptional effort to continue to succeed.

3. For Americans that understand that the opposite of American Greatness and the democracy it supports (along with a responsible and empowered citizenry) is tyranny and a dependent disempowered citizenry.
4. For anyone who cares about America continuing to be a model for the world – a world that needs that model in order to avoid the alternatives.

### III. Foundation Block #1 – Our Founding The courage to establish something completely new – a new type of nation

The founding of America was a new model of governance for the world, including the personal qualities required to establish such a model.

**The Core Elements.** America's greatness was based on a set of core values, a balance of individual liberty and public responsibility, a tri-partite governmental structure, critical processes like free elections, a system based on laws, and a set of key institutions. That combination was designed to protect individual liberty and the common well-being as well as prevent the usurpation of power by an individual or group - or the violation of the rule of law by rulers for their own benefit.



**Shared Personal Qualities.** The founding of America was also a model of the courage, commitment, and perseverance required to break free of the dominant model of autocratic hereditary rule and found something completely new. It was a model for the world of the

qualities required to literally put a life on the line and endure tremendous hardships, to establish a way of living that had no comforting history or future certainty on which to rely.

**It Wasn't Perfect.** Unfortunately, racism and slavery were built into our founding documents, structures, and cultural norms. It was part of our founding DNA. We are obviously still struggling with that – still struggling to realize the American dream for all Americans. It took constitutional amendments to include women and begin to include people of color. The second foundation block – the pursuit of a perfect union – has been a long tough journey, but it has continued for almost 250 years.

#### IV. **Foundation Block #2 – Our Historical Trajectory** **The persistence and resilience to “hold the course”**

Our path has not been perfect, but we have kept working at it, which has given us the second foundation block of America's greatness. The model provided to others from our founding to the present has been to persevere and keep grinding to fully realize the founding dream – having the courage and will to keep facing our gaps and commit to “holding the course” in order to pursue the original vision.

**America's greatness does not come from never having done anything wrong.** It comes from continuing to work at achieving the founding vision, being secure enough to acknowledge that we aren't there yet, and that we have made mistakes on the path. Our history is full of indefensible discrimination, injustice, and violence. We have poverty, crime, and inequality. The expansion of America after its founding was built on slavery and the dispossession of Native Americans.

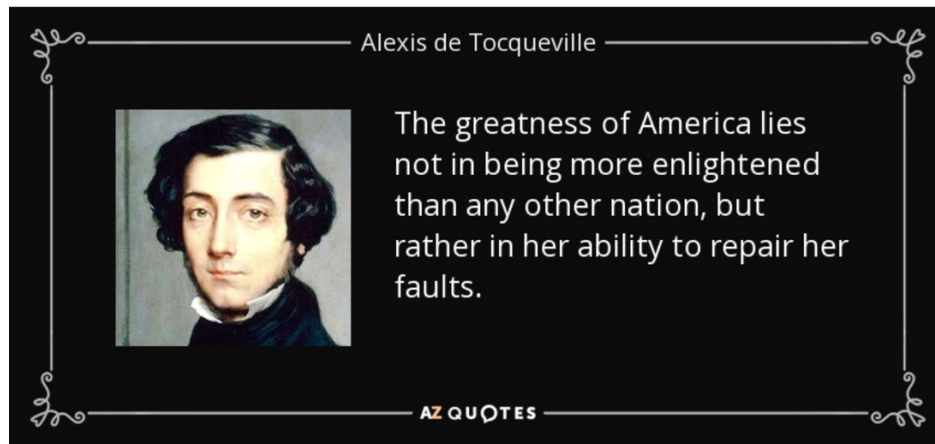
**Our willingness to keep saying “yes” to pursuing the original founding vision is our strength.** We have not fully achieved the dream, but neither have we handed over our responsibility (and our freedom) as citizens of a democracy to the false promises of a despot. Americans did not give up in the face of difficulty, frustration, and setbacks.

Our strength has been in continuing to fight to “right the wrongs”, not deny or defend them. The critical point is that we have shown the commitment and courage to acknowledge and confront them. America is great because we are secure enough to say:

*“Yes, we can do better – we will do better – we will always seek to do better.”*

**We aren't done yet and won't be for some time.** Our challenge is to celebrate hard won progress and – at the same time - keep acknowledging where we have come up short in

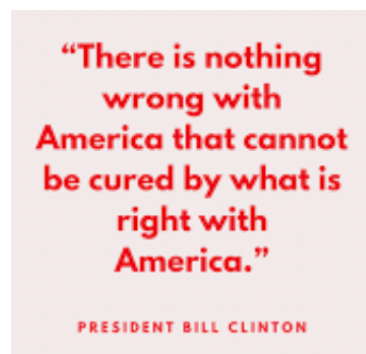
fully realizing America's promise – and to learn from the experience and keep grinding to fully realize the vision.



## V. Our Challenge Now

**America was a Grand Experiment – and it Still is.** The perseverance modeled in the second foundation block kept that experiment alive for the world. The willingness of current generations to meet the challenge of taking on the big tough issues we face is the question on which the continuation of the experiment now rests.

**What can American Greatness look like now?** What can the current American generations do to model and sustain it? Our Challenge is to be worthy of America, its founders and those who have sacrificed to keep it alive and to keep grinding to realize the vision. We are the beneficiaries of American Greatness and are entrusted with carrying it forward.



**The challenge is to come together to draw upon and model American Greatness for by taking on the big complex challenges we face, for instance::**

1. Climate change
2. The revitalization of rural America
3. Equitable income distribution and wealth
4. Socio/political polarization
5. Countering racism
6. Immigration (global and national)
7. Protecting biodiversity
8. Technology, particularly AI
9. Dealing with authoritarian regimes interested in ending the American experiment
10. Ensuring the basics – food security, housing, equitable cost-effective healthcare, etc.

At its best America has always been future oriented – not defensive or stuck in the past and not afraid of the future. It's always about moving forward, not backward – learning from the past, drawing on our best and “learning the way” as we push forward.

**The Key – Drawing on our courage and acting from our “larger selves.”** To do our part and carry American Greatness forward we must act from courage and our best vs. acting from fear and our smaller selves. We will either act with confidence from our larger selves and go after the big tough, complex challenges that matter the most - or we will act from our smaller selves out of fear and make a lot of noise while focusing on issues that aren't as scary (the ones that don't require greatness).

Fear will always be present in dealing with life's big tough challenges, but we must find the courage to transcend that fear and call upon our best and find new bests in the process. Our choice about acting from our larger or smaller selves is the key to our ability to take on the challenges we face and model American Greatness.

**American Greatness must be earned by every generation.** Every generation must pick up the challenge to take on the critical challenges it faces. Every generation must honor the past, acknowledge and learn from the mistakes, and tap into the courage, perseverance, and resilience at the heart of American Greatness – in order to continue on the path to fully realizing our founding vision.

*"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.  
We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for,  
protected, and handed on for them to do the same."*

Ronald Reagan



## VI. The “Call to Action” Going forth to meet the challenge

We either say “yes” to the challenge” and act - or we say “no” and stand on the sidelines. There is no middle ground. We can act in large or small ways, but we must act. Starting small is fine. Not acting is not fine.



### The Uncommon Qualities Required to Meet the Challenge

To go forth together to successfully take on the big tough challenges we face requires a set of qualities that are not common in societies – qualities that underlie the maintenance of American Greatness. These uncommon qualities support our actions whether they are large or small – whether they are focused on individual behaviors, group behaviors, or the strengthening of our institutions and processes.

We are talking about “greatness”, not “being ordinary.” “Being ordinary” is the natural default. “Great” requires intent and effort by a critical mass of Americans. Not everyone must act to support American Greatness, but a critical mass of Americans must.

*“The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it.”*

Michelangelo

### As individuals we are challenged to:

1. Understand and be inspired by our founding and our history of perseverance (and unapologetic about American Greatness)
2. Find the courage to commit to and model American Greatness, in large or small ways, through action
3. Act from our larger selves vs. our smaller selves - drawing on our values, courage, perseverance, willingness to risk/trust, and resilience vs. falling prey to fear, anxiety, and insecurity

4. Focus on the trajectory of our historical pursuit of American Greatness while being motivated by the remaining gaps
5. Focus on the big tough issues we face (climate change, the health of rural America, racism, poverty, etc.) vs. complaining, tearing down our democratic institutions and processes - or hiding by focusing on smaller challenges that don't require greatness.
6. Find the common ground on which to stand and use our differences as a source of creativity
7. Face any fear of the future and trust that we can go forth and take on the big issues and somehow find the right path and discover the capabilities required - even if they aren't evident in the beginning of the journey

### **As a nation we are challenged to:**

1. Continuously build and develop our institutions and processes because they are what holds everything together and they must be maintained and improved, or they naturally decay.
2. Constantly balance the natural dynamic tensions that exist between federal, state, and local governments as well as the dynamic tension between business and government, between individual rights and community well-being, etc.

These are the individual and national qualities and characteristics that have sustained American Greatness, but they are not common. They are, however, what protects America as a true democracy and what we can model for the world. We must stay focused on them and be disciplined in our attitude and behavior if we are to carry American Greatness forward.

*"These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great character is formed... Great necessities call out great virtue."*

Abigail Adams letter to John Quincy Adams

### **The Six Natural Pitfalls**

For anyone answering the call to model American Greatness and take on the big tough challenges that we face there are a few very powerful pitfalls that must be dealt with directly. They are normal and natural and exert most of their power when they are not addressed directly.

These natural pitfalls undermine the uncommon qualities generating American Greatness. They reflect acting from our smaller vs. larger selves. Six pitfalls stand out.

- #1 Failing to act from courage and confidence and falling prey to fear and insecurity
- #2 Defending and hiding in the past vs. going forth and creating the future
- #3 Focusing on “otherness” and defending vs. focusing on “togetherness” and creating
- #4 Standing on the sideline wondering, “But, what can I do?”; caught in the paralyzing World of “ain’t it awful?”; or simply hiding in denial or being unconscious
- #5 Retreating to the sidelines when faced with the inevitable and natural disappointments, rejections, setbacks, or a lack of short-term progress
- #6 Failing to persevere and stay outside of our comfort zone vs. tolerating discomfort and creating new larger comfort zones

*“Life doesn’t get easier or more forgiving, we get stronger and more resilient.”*

Steve Maraboli

### ***The American Experiment Won’t Survive Being Ordinary***

Our democracy can be taken from us by authoritarian regimes, which is not likely in the near term given America’s strength and resilience. We can, however, give it away by walking away from the challenge and abdicating to internal authoritarian forces - always a temptation because being a citizen in a democracy is demanding, requiring belief, courage, perseverance, and resilience.

It’s our turn to draw upon American Greatness and model it – acting to carry it forward and persevering against the odds.

*“America will never be destroyed from the outside.  
If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be  
because we destroyed ourselves.”*

Abraham Lincoln

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