

John Findley Green Foundation Lecture

55th Missouri Governor Jeremiah W. “Jay” Nixon

20th Annual Hancock Symposium: “Justice: For All?”

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Justice Renewed: Rebuilding Trust in Our Leaders and Ourselves

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today - at an unsettled moment for our state, our country, and the world.

At this point, you’ve spent the better part of two days examining every aspect of this year’s theme: Justice: For All? You may have reached the saturation point.

It’s fair to ask what I can add to the conversation.

What I offer are the lessons learned from 30 years of service to the people of Missouri. And from a lifetime of trying to live up to the ideals instilled in me as an Eagle Scout. Ideals like honesty, hard work, respect, fairness, and compassion. We need them right now.

My public service began *about 40 years ago...* when I ran for and won a seat representing Jefferson County in the Missouri Senate.

I was elected in 1986.

(Pause)

The first year that a woman, Ann Covington, served on the Missouri Supreme Court, and the last year the Cardinals football team played in St. Louis before moving to Arizona.

You win some, you lose some.

That was true of my political career as well. I lost two bids for the U.S. Senate.

But I became the longest serving Attorney General in state history, serving from 1992 to 2008. And when I ran for Governor of Missouri in 2008, I received more votes than anyone in state history.

(Pause)

Justice: For All?

Throughout my time in office, seeking justice was never a hypothetical. It was our guiding star.

As Attorney General, the pursuit of justice was specific to the individual: It was as real as the anguish of a parent who had lost a child to violence; as urgent as the righteous anger of a community poisoned by pollution. Seeking justice meant trying cases, winning settlements, and getting convictions.

As Governor, doing justice looked different still. It meant confronting more complicated questions. What does justice look like for a child growing up in poverty on the north side of St. Louis ... or for the 158 people killed by the EF5 tornado that struck Joplin. And what can be done to help?

Churchill also came to Fulton from the vantage of an elder statesman...71 years old ... war weary and stalked by bouts of melancholy, but determined to warn us about the rising threat from the Soviet Union.

(Pause)

Today, our democracy ... and our world ... again face the rising threat of political violence... extremism... and oppression.

In the past few days alone, we have witnessed the tragic assassination of a young activist on a college campus... and the incursion into a sovereign NATO nation by an emboldened communist superpower.

In Washington and across the country, we see the hallmarks of democracy under strain:

- abuses of power and self-dealing;
- demands for unquestioned loyalty;
- suppression of dissent;
- the use of fear and force to compel obedience;
- rampant lies and disinformation;
- spiralling political violence;
- and now, a power grab: partisan gerrymandering that would further erode the only means we have to hold those in power accountable;
- [Politicization of public safety assets.]

Individually and together we must stand against such threats, guided by the fundamental freedoms written into our Constitution....

- Our Constitution protects the right of all individuals to express their opinion – whether we agree with the speaker or not.
- Our Constitution grants us freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the freedom to petition our government to address problems and right wrongs.

- As a nation, we have lived and died for these freedoms at home and abroad many times over, from the American Revolution to World War II... to the trusted alliances we have built throughout the world.
- Freedom is our birthright, and it's the engine that has powered our contributions to the world..
 - An economy that produced the highest living standards on earth...
 - The ingenuity that brought us the telephone.. the light bulb... and the ability to map the human genome...
 - And the generosity that cured diseases and lifted millions of people out of poverty..

(Pause)

“Justice for all” was always more an aspiration than a reality.

The right question **now** isn't whether we can achieve “Justice for all”...

The right question now is whether **anyone still cares.**

Do we care enough about the principles of our democracy to preserve it... ***And what can each of us do to rekindle that necessary spark?***

(pause)

Read our founding documents, and there are clues.

On July 8th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was read in public for the first time. The honor was bestowed on my distant relative - Colonel John Nixon - then the sheriff of Philadelphia. He was brave in a town still stocked with loyalists of the King of England.

In a three-cornered hat... and surrounded by a boisterous crowd of onlookers - he spoke the words that most of us know by heart:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident... that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

“We **hold** these truths...”

Two hundred and fifty years later, now this generation - as every generation has done before it - must ask itself, how **WE can hold these truths... and secure these rights for all.**

What type of government have you designed, Franklin was asked. “A republic.... *if* you can keep it,” he said.

And keeping it requires something of us all.

(Pause)

From our leaders – we must demand respect for the rule of law and our fundamental freedoms – no excuses.

- Punishing people for what they say or what they believe has no place in America. This Administration’s threats to target people for being critical of Charlie Kirk’s ideology is an **insult to his memory**, and an affront to our values.
- That also means no more cancel culture... and we need to stop treating political **correctness** as a substitute for political **progress**.

We need leaders of radical honesty and integrity. We deserve nothing less.

There’s a temptation now to treat integrity as an old-fashioned virtue, a relic of a bygone era. To respond to hate with even more vitriol... to yell even more loudly...

This is dangerous...and even deadly.

To restore our democracy, we need leaders of radical integrity; leaders who are willing to tell the truth, admit mistakes... and ***reject violence and hatred in all its forms.***

Leaders who will remind us what courage looks like. As Maya Angelou wrote: *Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.*

Courage is not silencing your critics - that’s cowardice.

Courage is not bullying the vulnerable - that’s cruelty.

Courage is not belittling people who disagree with you... or stoking fear and hatred.

Courage is telling the truth, even when it’s hard... standing up to bullies. Behaving ethically even when it demands personal sacrifice.

(Pause)

One reason courage is hard to come by... people have forgotten the difference between politics and governing...

I ran many political campaigns over my 30 year career in public service, and I won most of ‘em. But I learned never to confuse politics with governing.

Politics must be distanced from governing. ***Epecially now that unlimited campaign contributions are flooding our elections.***

Politics is the game you must win to earn the privilege of public service – but it is just that: a game: with winners and losers, bare knuckled and often ugly. It's why Churchill called democracy "the worst form of government, except for all the others."

Governing demands something different. You have to represent everyone; individuals and the collective, simultaneously.

(Pause)

On Sunday, May 22, 2011 a devastating tornado struck Joplin. It was 5:30pm... dinner-time for toddlers; quitting time for the day-shift...

In 19 minutes, 14,000 people were made homeless... 158 lives were lost.

I'll never forget walking through the wreckage in the days and weeks after the storm. One might think that a community that had been through something like that would be broken and adrift.

But Joplin was anything but.

The people of Joplin were resolute, tenacious... and above all - united.

An army of first responders from 400 towns across the Midwest raced to the scene. A high school was rebuilt in a local mall in just 55 days. And when it did it was filled with books and laptops donated from half a world away.

The idea that I would have treated that community differently because some hadn't voted for me was inconceivable.

This is why we need leaders who understand that the purpose of our government is to help make people's lives better.

Leaders who bring people together to accomplish something that promotes the greater good – building roads and bridges.... investing in our schools.... keeping our streams clean enough to fish in..... helping communities threatened by floods, drought and tornadoes pick up the pieces and rebuild. These are just part of the list of responsibilities to the future we share.

(Pause)

But more important than the actions of our leaders... are the actions each of us must take, at the ballot box on Election Day, and each day in between, in church pews, around kitchen tables and in college classrooms.

The erosion of public trust in American institutions coincides with decades of hyper-partisan politics intended to divide us against ourselves, rather than unite us for the common good.

That distrust has been amplified by the decline of traditional media and the rise of unlimited campaign contributions – and taken viral by social media platforms.

Misinformation, disinformation, and bald-faced lies now spread faster than measles.

Untethered from **actual** reality, we are now free to create and foster our own. And the more time spent there, any solidarity we once may have felt with our neighbors has been effectively atomized.

As repressive regimes have always understood, “if you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.”

Our broken politics – and the people who profit from it – will conspire to divide us... **we need to find a way to act together.**

Extremists will try to overwhelm us for their benefit... **we must resist apathy with action.**

Cynicism cannot win and inaction supports it.

That means holding tight to who we are as Americans – all Americans.

A nation of immigrants, many of our ancestors fled poverty, injustice, and tyranny to build something better. We are the great great great grandchildren of slaves, and those who enslaved them... of the First Families who inhabited these lands, and those who drove them from it.

A nation of scrappy strivers, stitched together by our ideals... marked by our original sins, but redeemed by the courage and sacrifice that saved us from fascism and unleashed freedom and prosperity, the envy of the world.

This is the **true** story we need to tell. The promise we made to each other that we are still working to keep.

We don't hold these truths because we read them in some dusty old book. But because we decide, *together*, that they are the surest route to a more just and prosperous future.

Rekindling our faith in our founding ideals is necessary, but it is not sufficient to safeguard our future. We also need to restore our faith in each other.

We need to connect with each other in real life - not through a computer screen.

Too many of us are living lives of isolation... spending too much time in online echo chambers with people who agree with us.

Not only do social connections protect our health and promote our happiness, they help us make social progress. So join a faith community, become part of a civic organization, volunteer in a good cause with your neighbors.

Seek out someone who disagrees with you and just **listen**.

And when we are online - be vigilant against the kind of misinformation, disinformation, and partisan vitriol that has been tailored to divide us.

So next time you read something that triggers feelings of grievance or hate: don't take the bait. This stuff is poison: and responding to it with outrage just spreads the contagion further.

So log off. Go for a walk. Find a life-affirming activity that reminds you that **all** people are deserving of respect and compassion.

Finally...VOTE. Participate in the political process at every level you can. No one else can do it for you.

That is what true patriotism looks like – not just the swell in our chests when we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, but the actions we take daily to build a stronger, more united, and more just country for everyone.

(Pause)

The task before us is daunting. Finding leaders who appeal to our better angels... and breaking the fever of hyper-partisanship won't be easy. But the reward will be worth it.

What will it look like when we've succeeded?

Our elected officials will work together to solve big challenges – from crime to climate change.

College campuses like this one will be safe havens where we can teach and learn, debate and disagree, without fear of intimidation or violence.

Businesses will have the confidence to grow and invest – on the basis of a stable government that respects the rule of law.

In this future -

Our differences will get resolved at the ballot box - not the barricades.

America will reclaim its role as the country that defeated tyranny and never succumbed to it.

And the promises we make to our kids - of opportunity limited only by their talents and tenacity, will be made true.

This future is within our grasp, if we reach for it.

So when you leave this room today – *I have an assignment for you...*

Commit to honesty - with yourself, your classmates, your colleagues, your leaders. Fact-check what you read. And don't share what you know to be false, even if it fits your side's narrative.

Choose courage: not the bluster of shouting matches online, but the quiet steady courage it takes to listen, to care, and speak up – ***respectfully*** – when someone is being silenced.

Build connections, especially with people who see the world differently: Put down your phone for a night and join a campus group, a civic club, or a service project.

And vote - every time.

I implore each and every one of us to take this responsibility seriously and work to deliver justice wherever and whenever we can.

If you do these things—if we *all* do these things—we will prove worthy of Franklin's challenge. We will keep the republic.

Thank you.

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