



Happy Presidents' Day!

Once upon a time, the topic of “who sits in the White House” was not nearly so inflammatory as it is today. Of course, people have always had different political opinions. But in recent years, it seems like our differences have become far more of a talking point than the things we have in common.

Whether it's our political beliefs, our skin colors, our ethnicities, our religions, our respective life experiences, or even which sports teams we root for, the things that make us different too often end up dividing us. You only have to go online for a few minutes to see how much anger and derision exist in our country today – because we too often focus on our differences instead of what we have in common.

With Presidents' Day coming up, we decided to take a trip into history to see how past presidents have addressed this. That's how we came across a speech by John F. Kennedy in 1963. In his address, President Kennedy talked about the concept of world peace and what it would take to actually achieve it. High on the list, he explained, was the idea that we should focus more on what unites us than on what divides us.

Here's an excerpt of what he said. To us, it's one of the most important sentiments any president has ever expressed.

“Let us not be blind to our differences--but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that **we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.**”¹

We don't live in the Cold War, as he did, but we do live in an equally uncertain era. An era in which even minor disputes can feel like unbridgeable divides. But as President Kennedy went on to say, it's *our* responsibility as American citizens to bridge those divides. To heal those hurts. To see the good in others and build off that.

“My fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home. The quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad. We must show it in the dedication of our own lives. [For] wherever we are, we must all, in our daily lives, live up to the age-old faith that peace and freedom walk together. In too many of our cities today, the peace is not secure because the freedom is incomplete.

It is the responsibility of the executive branch at all levels of government – local, State, and National – to provide and protect that freedom for all our citizens by all means within their authority. It is the responsibility of the legislative branch, wherever that authority is not adequate, to make it adequate. **And it is the responsibility of all citizens in all sections of this country to respect the rights of all others and to respect the law of the land.**”¹

Kennedy was far from the only president to address this issue, of course. Over twenty years later, President Ronald Reagan would say this, in a speech given on July 4, 1986:

“All through our history, our Presidents and leaders have spoken of national unity and warned us that the real obstacle to moving forward the boundaries of freedom, the only permanent danger to the hope that is America, comes from within. It was their last gift to us, this lesson in brotherhood, in tolerance for each other, this insight into America's strength as a nation.

“My fellow Americans, it falls to us to keep faith with them and all the great Americans of our past. Believe me, if there's one impression I carry with me after the privilege of holding for five-and-a-half years the office held by Adams and Jefferson and Lincoln, it is this: **that the things that unite us -- America's past of which we're so proud, our hopes and aspirations for the future of the world and this much-loved country -- these things far outweigh what little divides us.** And so...we reaffirm that Jew and gentile, we are one nation under God; that black and white, we are one nation indivisible; that Republican and Democrat, **we are all Americans.** ...With heart and hand, through whatever trial and travail, we pledge ourselves to each other and to the cause of human freedom, the cause that has given light to this land and hope to the world.”²

What if this Presidents' Day, we all did our best to see each other the way Kennedy and Reagan urged us to? To not be blind to our differences, but to put more stock in what we have in common. To remember that we all must share this planet together. That we all breathe and dream and love. That we are all doing the best we can. That we are all mortal.

What if we did it not just on Presidents' Day, but every day? What kind of nation would we live in then? What kind of nation would we leave to our children? It would be a better one, we suspect, than the one we live in now. So, this Presidents' Day, that's just what we intend to do. To remember the words of our former presidents...as well as the words from another famous speech:

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”

This is something we can do.

We wish you a happy Presidents' Day!

Sincerely,

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¹ “Commencement Address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963. *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.* <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>

² “Address to the Nation on Independence Day,” July 4, 1986. *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.* <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-independence-day>

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