

"Whatever the Future May Hold, America Dare Not Face It Divided and Unsure" -- *E Pluribus Unum*

An Open Letter to the President-Elect and to the New Congress

The upcoming year may prove to be among the most consequential in our nation's history.

Can America meet the challenges we are now facing, in our domestic economy and in our global relations, if many of our fellow citizens are more aware of what divides us than of what unites us? Can our governing institutions function effectively to meet these challenges if the foundations upon which these institutions are built -- the unity and sense of the common good -- are weakened and less certain?

The answer to these questions, we believe, is "no."

Several months ago, The Bradley Project on America's National Identity released its report entitled *E Pluribus Unum*. The report found that our nation is facing an identity crisis and that we are in danger of becoming not "From Many, One," but its opposite, "From One, Many." Indeed, although most Americans believe there is a unique identity that defines what it means to be an American, over six in ten believe our national identity is getting weaker.

And most troubling, younger Americans -- on whom our continued national identity depends -- are significantly less likely than older Americans to believe in a unique national identity or a unique American culture.

The Bradley Project called upon Americans and our leaders to engage in a conversation about our national identity: What does it mean to be an American, how can our national identity be sustained, and why is the strength and clarity of our national identity vital to our future?

That call is more vital today than when it was first issued. We say this because we believe that without a strong belief in the common good and in what unites us as Americans, our capability as a nation to address the significant problems before us today will be seriously imperiled.

The project's report speaks to the fundamental need for a conversation focused on national unity. It rightly asserts: "America is unique among nations in being founded not on a common ethnicity, but on a set of ideas... . But a nation founded on an idea starts anew with each generation and with each new group of immigrants. Knowing what America stands for is not a genetic inheritance. It must be learned, both by the next generation and by those who come to this country. In this way, a nation founded on an idea is inherently fragile. And a nation that celebrates the many ways we are different from one another must remind itself constantly of what we all share."

When we first issued this call, it resonated across the country. Over 250,000 have since visited the Bradley Project website at www.BradleyProject.org. Notable historians and social commentators, ranging from Pulitzer Prize winners David McCullough and Walter A. McDougall to Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard College and Amy A. Kass, senior lecturer at the University of Chicago, endorsed the project's call to action. And the project's report has received nationwide editorial and columnist attention in the Washington Post, the Denver Post, the Detroit Free Press, The Atlantic, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the National Journal, among many others.

Our concerns have heightened over the past six months not because our unity has diminished further, but because the importance of national unity has grown in its role to provide the foundational elements necessary to move our nation forward.

We call upon our nation's new leadership in the White House and in Congress to take actions that can strengthen our national unity and national purpose. Among these are using the major upcoming national events, including the Presidential Inauguration, the State of the Union Address, and the opening of the new Congress to speak directly to:

- the link between our founding principles and self-government in this new century;
- the direction and character of civic education including the teaching of history that exposes students to America's great heroes, dramatic achievements and high ideals, and that emphasizes those "mystic chords of memory" that Abraham Lincoln believed held our country together;

- the challenge of integrating newcomers into America, as well as engaging future generations, so that they participate fully in America's social, economic and civic life;
- the importance of promoting our national unity while appreciating the benefits of diversity; and
- the relationship between a strong national identity and the long-term health of American democracy. As historian Gordon Wood observes, "It's our history, our heritage, that makes us a single people."

Over 200 years ago Benjamin Franklin said, "...we must, indeed, all hang together or most assuredly we shall hang separately." His words were far more real than metaphoric in the time of our nation's birth. But in today's world they are a reminder of what is at stake if we fail to reinforce the foundations of our nation and promote the common good.

Sincerely,

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James W. Ceaser, University of Virginia

Sandra Stotsky, University of Arkansas

Rear Adm. Mike Ratliff, President, The Jack Miller Center

Fred Siegel, Cooper Union for Science & Art

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