

## Gilligan: America's never-ending battle for its own soul

By John F. Gilligan

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For those who have forgotten, the real Mall of America is not in Bloomington, Minn., but extends from the United States Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. Our nation stands for more than commercial success. If not, let's join the European Union and be done with it.

Presidents' Day honors George Washington, America's Founding Father, and Abraham Lincoln who saved the Union and in whose Memorial "is enshrined his memory forever." A good cynic, however, would quickly point out that Presidents' Day doesn't do that at all.

It was just a political strategy of ensuring that federal employees would get a long weekend. Washington's birthday, once a national holiday, rarely falls on a Monday. Furthermore, Congress — reflecting a culture in which everyone gets a trophy—never specified whether the day was to acknowledge Washington, Lincoln, both or all presidents.

The fact is that most presidents were mediocre, some lousy and a few, like Washington and Lincoln, extraordinary. They led the nation through its greatest life-and-death crises. Yet they still speak to us.

The media repetitively assert that we are a divided nation. It suggests that Americans are stunned and at a loss because of humpty-dumpty's great fall. But when was that golden age when Americans all got along?

When Washington became president, the nation was fractured just like today. There was a myriad of ethnic groups in America — from every part of Europe with bitter antipathies, Native Americans with tribal enmities, and one-fifth of the population African American slaves. Only half the white population could trace ancestry to England. Add to this the diversity of religions and their mutual animosities.

In sum, Washington was bequeathed a set of conflicting cultures and cultures within cultures. And before he finished his first term, opposition newspapers and political societies — factions — were sprouting-up from Maine to Georgia. Washington, outraged, described them as "the most diabolical attempts to destroy the best fabric of government

that has ever been presented for the acceptance of mankind.” Although presidential exorcisms since then have not been notable, Washington’s leadership harnessed these natural forces of self-destruction with a vision of liberty.

And the soul of liberty is freedom of thought and freedom of expression. It’s been greatly cherished and sought for in this land of the free. But that’s a double-edged sword. How do 330 million Americans wield these freedoms without slicing and dicing one another up?

Virtue was Washington’s answer: the practice of self-restraint in word and deed from cradle to grave. Liberty depended upon citizens refraining from intruding upon or oppressing a fellow citizen’s lifestyle and freedom of thought and expression whether it be political or religious. Without that virtue, liberty destroys itself.

Lincoln made the national vision explicit like no other president: “A new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The Civil War became a battle to the death over our identity as a people. That war’s over, but the battles never cease.

Lincoln understood why. Human nature remains the same no matter how much the world changes. Handling colliding human passions is like juggling vials of nitroglycerin. It’s a dangerous and messy business. This is what presidents must do or any elected official who wants to be a leader. That takes wisdom, discernment, and personal discipline.

The same applies to citizens. After all, self-government is ultimately the task of citizens and not a simple hand-off to elected representatives. Living well together is hard work.

The existential threat to our nation is not the “other” but ourselves. The intrinsic centrifugal forces of the American republic are the liberated interests and passions of the people. Can we constrain them for the greater good of the nation? That’s a battle that never ceases.

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