

## Gilligan: Let's get our act together, for the common good

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America is pretty glum this Thanksgiving. The recent survey by the Pew Research Center indicates that less than 25 percent “trust our government in Washington to do the right thing ... most of the time.” That includes the president, Congress and the Supreme Court. Certainly a low water mark. One can only imagine where the state of Illinois would fall with a similar assessment.

The recent human slaughter in Paris has Americans nervous about another 9/11. And a quick scan of the social-economic landscape reveals noticeable discord, resentment and anger among the body politic. So, what's to be thankful for?

Lest pessimism and fear get the upper hand, it's helpful to get back to basics.

The Civil War was America's bloodiest and most depressing period of discord. It was the week before Thanksgiving (19 November 1863) when Abraham Lincoln spoke to the American people at Gettysburg. He reminded us quite succinctly of who we were, what we believed in, and what we were trying to achieve: “a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

We have come a long way since that day. The fact is that no nation in the history of the world has ever forged its political foundation on the inherent dignity of the human person. That in itself is worth a Thanksgiving Day.

Is America perfect? Of course not, because we're not perfect beings. Our work, noted Lincoln, is “unfinished.” It is indeed, given human nature, a never-ending task.

Be thankful for the fact that we live in a better nation than ever before. There is just no comparison. The material quality of our lives, health and freedom exceed all previous generations. On the other hand, what we have today is the gift of those who came before us. And it behooves us to do likewise for our children and grandchildren.

Thanksgiving is our national ritual of recognizing that life-fulfillment and happiness is a product of our relationships with family, friends and fellow Americans. It's this interdependency that allows us to flourish as human beings.

America, as Lincoln articulated in his Gettysburg Address, holds as sacred the dignity and worth of each person. Not everyone in the world shares that sacred American belief. Sadly, many Americans dishonor it. But unlike ISIS and other jihadist groups, we do not sanctify killing and the sadistic brutalizing of those who disagree.

Yet we must be on guard. Discord is the fatal cancer of all families, communities and institutions. It destroys common action for the common good. It already pervades too much of American life. And a divided nation would turn us into low-hanging fruit for those intent on liquidating American lives.

Thanksgiving is a good day to make a decision on getting our own act together. Let's set those irritations and animosities that divide us — whether racial, ethnic, religious, gender or political — and start focusing on the common good of the nation. And in so doing, we will not only preserve but better it.

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