

Gilligan: Citizens, not politicians, are ultimately accountable for our fate

By John F. Gilligan

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Here's the question: Can the United States of America, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" still endure? Lincoln asked it in 1863. Discord had brought the Union to the point of dissolution.

Today's crisis is of a different nature. The Pew Research Center finds that trust in our Federal government to do what's right "just about always" or "most of the time" has fallen from 73 percent in 1958 to 18 percent in 2017.

According to the 2017 Gallup Poll, trust in other institutions has also plummeted: Banks, Education, Religious, Media, etc. Our military, however, is the most trusted institution in America, garnering 75 percent of the people's confidence. But the most vital institution of all, Congress, is rock bottom. Trust in it has averaged less than 10 percent for the past five years.

This implies that Americans don't trust the very people we have elected. Legislators' self-interest is perceived to prevail over the common good of the people. The consequences are not trivial.

The symptoms are Congressional gridlock, abysmal collaboration to achieve the common good, and a pervasive ill will in the halls of Congress. It takes self-control to secure an enduring nation. But it's being overwhelmed by discord.

We the people have also allowed ourselves to be caught up in the passions of the moment and have unwittingly contributed to America's balkanization. George Washington warned us that "men who are governed more by passion and party than by the dictates of justice, temperance, and sound policies" would be our undoing.

American democracy only works because of voluntary compliance with the laws of the land. If citizens no longer trust their government, motivation to comply becomes devoid of any moral sanction. For when people believe that the laws, policies and administrative practices are arbitrary and capricious — "that it's all political" — voluntary compliance gradually degenerates. Life in America then grows coarser; and its future is left to the whims of chance.

Now critiques of the current political conditions in Washington and Springfield are easy. It's true that our representatives are responsible for gridlock and failure to cooperate and collaborate for the good of the country. On the other hand, they either reflect us or we allow them to pretend that they do. No one gets elected without the people's votes.

"A government of the people, by the people, and for the people" means that we the people of the United States of America are ultimately accountable. The Declaration of Independence makes a blunt and unequivocal statement about a government that fails. Not only is it the "Right of the People to alter or abolish it ... it is their duty."

Nothing takes care of itself. American democracy is a very dicey proposition. It depends upon citizens to first rule themselves. When everyone pursues their own desires under the banner of individual rights, it creates social centrifugal forces of uncivil discourse, disrespect, anger, and hate. It's called discord, a condition that can readily shred us apart.

So, what's the counter force that binds us as a nation? It's threefold: A vision of what our nation can be; holding our representatives accountable to achieve that vision; and treating our fellow citizens with respect. This is what Benjamin Franklin meant when he was supposedly asked upon leaving the Constitutional Convention if we had a new constitution. He answered: "Yes, if you have the virtue to keep it."

Whether Franklin said this is secondary to the inherent truth of the statement. A thriving democracy demands a culture of self-discipline, a virtuous citizenry.

If you don't like what Congress is doing, then change it. It's "our duty." We, not they, are ultimately accountable for our fate. Change requires work, courage, risk and involvement. That's what our ancestors did in 1776. But will we follow in their footsteps?

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