

---

# Devotion: Declaring Our Intentions in Public Life

*Richard C. Harwood*

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”

Over a year ago, terrorists attacked our nation. Just hours later, members of Congress gathered on the steps of Congress and joined hands, Democrats and Republicans, to sing “God Bless America.” At that moment, from the lips of our leaders in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere in the nation, we were told that the tone and the nature of politics and public life in America would change. News media coverage was to deepen and be more serious. Each and every one of us, as a citizen, was to step forward and engage in public life in a new and deeper way.

We now know from the 2002 election season that those predictions were wrong, more wrong than I think we ever cared to admit. The gap that exists between what we want in public life and politics and what we have is larger today than it was before September 11, 2001.

But how could that be, and is it OK? The situation leads me to ask some questions about our current condition.

Is it OK that the patriotism of some candidates who ran for office this past year—some of whom left limbs on the field of battle in service to their country—was impugned simply because they had questions over Homeland Security legislation? Or that in Maryland, one candidate was called a Nazi by a campaign consultant, and in Alabama campaign ads regularly tagged another candidate a “serial liar”?

Just when you thought the news media would not sink lower, is it OK that Fox Television, on the heels of its gigantic success with “American Idol,” announces a new competition show, “American Candidate,” in which it will crown an ordinary American who will pretend to run for president in 2004? Indeed, is it OK that in the 2002 elections more and more news media outlets provided less and less coverage of the substance of politics?

Is it OK that so many of us citizens, those of us who were to step forward after September 11 and engage in public life in a new and deeper way, refused

to vote? It seems now that many of us have retreated from public life, only to lock our front doors and pull shut the shades.

We must ask ourselves, Is this the kind of politics and public life we want in this nation? I believe deeply that our current condition fails to reflect our genuine hope for public life and politics. It does not give voice to our aspirations for the kind of country we want America to become. It does not do justice to the good and noble instincts that so many of us, most of us, if not all of us, bring to our public lives.

Our politics and public life are a far cry from what we seek.

### A New Political Covenant

If I have come to know anything from traveling throughout the country for the last fifteen years, it is crystallized in this one insight: people yearn today for a new covenant in our public life and politics. It is a covenant that starts among political leaders, the news media, and citizens and has at its core these aspirations:

- *Political leaders* who engage in a different kind of relationship with citizens—all citizens, from all walks of life—and take responsibility for explaining where they stand, setting the right tone for politics, and conducting themselves forthrightly
- *News media* that help people truly come to know about public issues and political leaders, and that understand people need and want room to form their own judgments, at their own pace and rhythm
- *Citizens* who stop merely complaining about the state of public life and politics and assume responsibility for changing what they see and creating the kind of nation we all seek

We in this nation want this new covenant because we know we can do better. We want it because we know there is unfinished work to do. We want it because such a covenant requires that we improve our public conduct; without such improvement, the march toward good is too easily sidetracked.

Let me be clear. It is not a Miss Manners kind of politics that is being sought—an afternoon tea at which people exchange niceties and keep potentially tough, uncomfortable, or controversial issues off the table. Instead, we are in search of a vibrant marketplace of ideas. Where vigorous debates occur. Where passion and emotion have a role to play, because they signify that we care deeply. It is a politics in which character is of genuine concern, not used merely for short-term political gain or to embarrass others. Americans want a politics in which all people and all perspectives have a place at the public table. In this politics, disagreement is a cherished democratic value.

But this is not the politics and public life we have today.

Our new political covenant summons us to step forward—to move from our private lives, our private interests, our private selves, into the public square

where each of us can be seen, where we can be heard, where we can engage in the public work that awaits us. There is an undeniable yearning that exists within us to be part of something larger than ourselves; our new covenant is about how we can come together to set a common course for this common enterprise in this common land we call the *United States of America*.

### **Bringing Our Full Selves**

But to achieve this covenant, we must act. We must bring ourselves to do something that is viewed to be risky by many in our public lives, perhaps even alien to some. At issue is a test of our character, a test that focuses on one small but profound word: *devotion*.

The challenge before us is to exercise a new devotion to public life and politics. It is especially at times like these, when politics and public life are not to our liking, when they most require improvement, that our devotion is tested—and most needed.

This is no simple task. If you have ever been truly devoted to anything or to anyone—a partner or a spouse or a friend, to an idea, or to a child—then you know that you must bring your *full* self to it. There is no going halfway.

Lately, I have been reading about people who pray successfully—better put, who pray *fully*. I suspect that many of us pray only halfway. We go through the rituals, say the right words, show up at the designated times. But to pray *fully* means that bring your full self. You must relinquish yourself—not in terms of giving up or giving in, but *embracing* your devotion. When we pray fully, we open ourselves up to engage . . . to hear, to listen and, yes, even to believe. In our society—in our public lives—we need such devotion.

There is a word that is intended to capture the essence of such devotion in our public lives. Its history began long before the founding of this country. But it is a word that has too often been co-opted by action movies, speechwriters, and rhetoricians (in the absolute worst sense of the word *rhetoric*). This word has often dominated our public discourse since September 11. The word is *patriotism*.

But before I articulate the kind of patriotism, the kind of public devotion, of which I speak, let me say clearly what I do *not* mean by invoking this word. For some in our nation, *patriotism* is a word riddled with a history of exclusion, suggesting to them that the American Dream is only for some people and not for others. In times of national or community struggle, patriotism can come to mean demanding lockstep agreement, leading to a kind of myopic close-mindedness. It can give us license to believe that anyone different from ourselves is not welcomed. We can come to view people as *unpatriotic* if they choose not to display the flag or a decal on their car, or choose not to sing the words to “God Bless America” at a ballgame. These meanings are not what I intend, for they seem to me to offend our deepest American sensibilities.

I certainly do not mean the kind of patriotism that bigots and hate groups and so-called militia in this country have put forth, those who have hijacked

the term and angle to wrap themselves in the stars and stripes of our flag. Perhaps some would argue that these and other people are expressing a kind of devotion to their beliefs. Yet this kind of devotion is rooted not in engagement but in unmitigated hatred.

I believe there is a pressing need in our country for a deeper patriotism that truly expresses our devotion. Look up the word *patriotism* and you find that it means simply “a devotion to, a love of, one’s country.” Although there can be an ugly side to such patriotism, I believe our nation’s history suggests time and again the *possibility* for something quite different—something quite beautiful.

To me, patriotism, a deep devotion, means that we hold such pride in our communities, and in this nation, that we are willing to stick with them even when we no longer like what they have become, or the direction in which they seem to be going. Surely, there are many things we have not done right in these United States—our nation’s history and our current state of affairs offer glaring clarity on this matter. But even as we have missed the mark—as we have endured slavery, women being unable to vote, a chilling lack of civil rights, a long string of mistakes that we see today in our everyday lives—the people of this nation have worked tirelessly to improve its condition. This story of improvement, of *struggle*, is central to the American experience. Repeatedly, people have stepped forward to say, “I am not going to turn away from my country; rather, I am going to turn my attention to improving this great land.” Today the fight undoubtedly continues. Each generation before us has sought to better fulfill the promise of democracy. We must do the same.

This genuine devotion is rooted in a sense of love for our public life so deep that it calls us to search for what is good and right, especially when such a path is the hardest to walk. This means that we must stand in the public square for principles such as freedom of expression, tolerance, true exchange and debate, and a place for the common person in our public life. It means that we must ask the tough questions and hold ourselves accountable for answering them. Blind acceptance, resignation, falling into lockstep—these are the enemies of devotion. Indeed, it is too easy for each of us to hear the whispers in our ear that tell us to turn our back and walk away.

Devotion tells us to open our eyes and to give of ourselves.

The word *patriotism* conjures up something in our hearts and our minds and our souls, something that reverberates deep within us. As I have traveled the country, I find that this word, when spoken with care and affection, reminds people of their aspirations for these United States and their hopeful place in it. It reminds us that we can do better, and that our work is far from done.

A patriotism rooted in devotion also informs us that we hold the ability to make things happen, and that we do not have to wait for others to give us permission to act. This too is the story of America. On the most significant issues

in this nation's history, and on those issues that may have touched our lives yesterday in our local neighborhoods, the people who have made a difference did not wait. They banded together in small groups, one by one, their actions typically sparked by a conversation around a small table, over a fence, or after a religious service, without fanfare. They sought to do what was good and right. Today, there are still things that we need to do, and tomorrow and the next day there will be more; we know there are things we ought to have done yesterday that would have improved our common condition. A genuine patriotism, a deep devotion, tells us to heed the impulse to act.

To the people I have met across our land, a devotion to our public life and politics surely requires that we be willing to give of ourselves. But it is more than that. It is to give *beyond* oneself. Human nature tells us that we will always hold self-interest, and that such deep-seated instincts will never disappear or be stripped from our souls. After all, why should one not care about one's own child and where she goes to school, or whether one's street is safe and clean, or about the quality of an elderly parent's health care? The question in America is not whether we can do away with self-interest. It is whether we are willing to work to find our *common* interest. This is especially true at those times when our own interest ultimately must take a back seat. The exercise of a deep devotion to public life would ask us to cease the self-absorbed politics, the self-centered politics, the me-first politics that we all too often experience in this country.

We must take responsibility for our public life and politics if we seek to improve them.

Lastly, a deep devotion means that we declare our intentions to engage fully in the public square. But these intentions will emerge only from within us, formed from our sentiments about how we think about public life and our relationship to it. Unfortunately, we cannot buy these public sentiments in a store. We cannot go to a Website and download them. They are not something we can get from a five-step program. We cannot earn them by punching a clock and putting in time. Our children will not get them just because they are educated in a public building. No one can give them to us. Instead, we must cultivate these public sentiments within ourselves. We must actively do this within our home, within our neighborhood, within our community.

What is compelling about devotion is that we cannot go halfway.

Nor is patriotism—this kind of devotion—something to do alone, for the word *patriot* has a derivative: *compatriot*, which means “fellow country people.” The fact that patriotism even has a derivative should tell us something: we are destined to be in relationship with one another. We live in communities, not alone. There is another word that offers to us a similar insight, a word that is perhaps more familiar to us in our daily lives but has too often been stripped from our public lexicon: *citizen*.

To have compatriots, to be citizens, means that we are to be engaged with one another.

## We Must Change

As we look across our politics and public life, there is much that tells us not to exercise a genuine patriotism, a deep devotion. Many of the messages, values, and ways in which we conduct ourselves send us signals, sometimes explicit and other times subtle, that it is far easier to walk away than to engage. But there is much work to do. Today, we must devote ourselves to overcoming the forces that continue to undermine the promise, the hope, the vision for a better public life.

Bobby Kennedy once said that people like progress, but they do not like change. But if we are to exercise a devotion to public life and politics in our lives, then each of us must change. The time is now.

Three key conditions in particular require our urgent attention. They have become ingrained within many of us as individuals; they have also come to set a common context for us as a nation and a people.

First, we must end what I call our “exit strategy.” As consumers or customers in the marketplace, we routinely exercise such a strategy. When we are unhappy with a product, we simply exit by choosing another one. Product loyalty is a tough sell these days. We treat public life in much the same way. For instance, if we do not like our kid’s public school, we simply try to pick another one—leaving behind the public problems that exist. If we do not like our neighbor, we build a fence. If we do not like the community in which we live, we seek to move to a gated one. Even in the most public of places, when we are in the closest proximity to one another—when seated, for instance, next to someone on a bus or a train—we turn on our Walkman and put on our headphones so that we do not need to bother with our seatmates.

This exit strategy allows us to visit a place and then leave. Our politicians do it all the time when they hold town meetings; they stop by, listen for a few minutes, and then exit. Many of us then complain that they come around only when they want something (like our vote). It is a kind of hit-and-run politics. Our news media do it when they drop into a neighborhood for the first time to do a quickie story and then disappear—never to deeply understand the issue at hand or the community, never to accurately reflect a true sense of wholeness.

When it comes to exercising devotion in public life, we must adopt what Woodrow Wilson once called a “posture of ownership.” The exit strategy we employ is based on a mind-set that tells us we can “visit” public life when it is to our liking or convenience, and then go home whenever that suits us better. But consider the difference between visiting a place and *residing* there. A true resident takes ownership; a visitor assumes a posture of convenient exit. Genuine devotion tells us to stay.

Second, if we are to express our devotion, we must release ourselves from the burden of oppression in public life. In Exodus, God called to Moses and declared, “Go release the Israelites from their burden of oppression.” I am told that in Hebrew, one interpretation of the word *burden* is something other than

shouldering some great pain or imposition. It can mean something quite different: resignation or acceptance. So the charge to Moses was to go tell the Israelites to no longer accept their plight, no longer accept the destiny that they thought they had been handed, and stand up and do something. The old slave song “Free at Last” tells us a similar story. In the song’s second verse, I find some of the most beautiful words I have ever heard: “I thought my soul would rise and fly.” The slaves sang these words long before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Their words were rooted in a hope, perhaps an expectation, about what might come—that somehow or another tomorrow would be different from today. They chose not to be resigned to their horrific plight. Their singing was a declaration of their intentions, to move beyond their immediate condition; it was, in short, a refusal to accept the burden of oppression.

If we are to improve our politics and public life, then we need to release ourselves from our resignation that public life and politics have to be the way they are today, and declare that they can be better, that *we* can be better. There is unfinished work to do.

Third, we must end our low expectations of ourselves in the public square. As I travel the country, I am struck time and again by the extent to which we give ourselves permission to put our hands over our ears, close our eyes, turn our backs, and even deaden our sensitivity at times to those things around us that require our attention, our engagement. From the time we are small, we are all reared with a simple adage: if you expect little of yourself, you give little. It is no different in public life and politics.

But this is what we often do, sometimes without even considering or fully recognizing the effect of our words and deeds. Most of us send signals to our children that voting is not important, because we ourselves do not vote. We stand idly by as people talk negatively about a political leader, a school principal, the next-door neighbor, while we actually believe that the individual is a good and decent person. We say to ourselves that someone else will go to the public meeting, thereby absolving ourselves of any responsibility. We complain that we do not like the tone of public discourse, that too many people place too many claims on public resources such as our schools, and then we turn around and join the crowd (often in subtle ways).

A devotion to public life and politics calls upon us to hold higher expectations for ourselves. It tells us to exercise those expectations and hold ourselves accountable to them. True, we must expect these things from our public officials and news media; but we must also expect them from ourselves.

We must expect more, if we seek more.

### **A Question of Openness**

As I do my work across the country, with citizens, leaders, people from the news media, and others, I find that to exercise such devotion requires that we come to terms with two important personal values that shape our public lives.

The first is one that garners much attention in our nation, that books are written about and about which speeches are made; the other receives little attention at all.

The first value is *courage*. But I do not speak of courage in the way we so often seem to highlight it in our lives—the courage of beating our breast, or engaging in angry rhetoric, or pumping ourselves up and strutting around with a sense of bravado. The courage to which I refer is the courage to step forward and engage with others; the courage to generate and create things together that we can hold in common; the courage to deal with ambiguity, because so much of life is ambiguous; the courage to listen to others, especially when their views hurt our ears or send pangs of anger through our gut. Much of our courage these days is based on shutting out others and their views, and yet the courage necessary to exercise devotion requires that each of us bring a special quality of openness to public life.

Devotion also calls upon us to exercise a second value, one of which we seldom speak in our public life and in America these days: *humility*. When we are engaged with others, we come to understand that we alone do not have all the answers. We find that the answers we do generate together may need to be altered as we learn and gain experience over time. It is hard to be open—to hear, to understand, to feel—without humility. St. Augustine once said, “There is something in humility that raises the heart upward.” It seems to me that patriotism, when exercised with devotion, acts to raise our hearts upward.

### **Who Will Be There?**

The times in which we live are not welcoming for a new devotion. We will always find people encamped among us bellowing that this kind of devotion to public life and politics cannot succeed. They will urge us to admit that politics and public life have always been a nasty affair, and that it is foolhardy to expect much change. There are others who will say that the only way to improve politics and public life is to enact more laws, to govern how we act and guide us in our ethics.

Perhaps there is some truth to such statements, but I believe they miss a larger point—and a larger opportunity. Whether we are devoted in public life and politics is, first and foremost, a question of our heart. It is about who we choose to be, and who we seek to become. At issue today is how we choose to see ourselves and our role in the public square—as political leader, journalist, citizen, civic activist. It is about how we choose to conduct ourselves. It is about the public sentiments that we choose, or choose not, to cultivate within ourselves, within our children, and within each other. It is about how we will shape our civic organizations and public institutions and how they do their work.

This new devotion is, in the end, about declaring our intentions. It is about consequences. If we do not enter the public square with a new sense of

devotion, then who will be there? Will we be satisfied to leave the public square to organized interests, with their narrow agenda? To those who can find the money and the resources to raise their voices and drown out others? To news media that seem more interested at times in conflict and division than in illuminating the tough issues that we need to deal with as a society? To public officials and political leaders who seem to pursue their own interest at the expense of our common interest?

We cannot reach for our aspirations if we do not take our place in the public square.

Let us remember that this new devotion is not an easy path for us to walk. Our efforts will not always be met with success, or with people cheering us on. We must exercise devotion one step at a time.

Dorothy Day, the great social activist, once said:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort?

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that.

No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There's too much work to do.

We can do better. There is indeed much unfinished work to do. Each of us is called to exercise a new devotion to politics and public life. For it is only when we stand in the public square that we can make a difference together.