
Opinion: 2024 Brings Hope for America

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I was recently walking my dog down our street. It's a nice neighborhood. We have wide streets with quiet neighbors who seem mostly friendly, though we don't get to chat much these days. I looked at the horizon as the sun rose, overrun with red-streaked clouds, reminding me of the adage: "Red sky in morning, sailors take warning."

The new year may bring trouble, but it will also bring opportunity. America may be a political mess, and things are likely to get more volatile with elections. But we remain a nation full of good people.

A new sign recently went up along the highway in Millersville, Maryland. It's a historical marker. I don't think many people noticed it. I might even be the only driver who has pulled over to read it.

It detailed the story of an inn that once existed on adjacent land. A widow managed the inn for travelers in the 1700s when most inland travel was on horseback or by carriage. It could be a bumpy, bruising journey in bad weather.

The widow offered guests respite for years, the sign stated, likely a warm smile and equally warm hearth to call home for a night or two. The sign stated that George Washington found a place to lay his head at the inn during his travels to points north.

Many might consider Washington to have been a great American — the father of our country. The widow innkeeper was an ordinary, unsung resident. She was not fit to embellish accounts of great battles or great accomplishments.

Her inn must have looked pretty great to Washington after a long, hard ride on that rocky dirt road. Treks through the wilderness then were hard for the great and the ordinary alike. The widow was offering aid that was greatly appreciated by our first president and her other guests.

In my experience, greatness — something many aspire to — is a burden and also an invitation to pride, something I can do without. At our finest, I've observed, our nation's true strength is not in pride or in greatness. It lies in the humility, honesty, and hope of everyday people.

Most of any great thing our nation has accomplished has come mainly from the collective toil, sweat and commitment of folks like the innkeeper. Our virtue has always been fueled by ordinary folks doing extraordinary things, which far eclipses the ambitious few politicians who too often seek to turn that to their advantage.

In 2024, we will be forced to answer questions together about our own collective journey. Do we convict a former president and then elect him? Re-elect an elderly man whose energy seems to be fading, just as challenges and growing decline seem common now? How we got here doesn't matter as much as where we'll be going together.

There is goodness and strength in our union, whoever leads. The first Sunday of Advent found my wife and I with no room to sit in a regular pew, so we went into the children's room. Entering, one of our fellow Americans — a total stranger to me — burst in a full sprint across the carpet.

Her 3-year-old legs carried her quickly to me, and she embraced me for no apparent reason. My heart filled with an unexpected but very welcome joy. The girl smiled, lingered for a bit, and then returned to Grandma.

That hug made the end of a sour weekend sweet for me. My red-sky mood changed to a rising sun of possibilities. Whose America will the little girl inherit? The innkeeper's? Or the ambitious politicians'?

It's been said that a child is evidence of God's opinion that the world should go on. The little girl and the forgotten widow don't manifest greatness. They have and will change the world, though. The good they do is better than any greatness we might hitch our egos to.

You won't find the widow or the little welcomer in the headlines or in our political leadership. But they are more real and more powerful than Trump, Biden and Washington combined. Daily virtues are eternal, as are our Declaration's self-evident truths.

I refuse to relinquish them. But I do relinquish greatness and leave its assessment to the judgment of 22nd-century historical markers. As 2024 rolls in, I welcome the new year. And I hope you will, too. The sun is rising in America. It's time to get the new day underway, it is hoped with plenty of hugs.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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