

Montana Taxpayers Association  
Marc Racicot  
December 8, 2021

It is, genuinely, an honor and a privilege to be invited here to celebrate the first 100 years of history of the Montana Taxpayers Association. Thank you for the invitation. And thank you for your good work on behalf of all of us who depend upon your dedication to the best interests of our fellow citizens.

As I was contemplating what might be appropriate for me to share with all of you, I got lost in thought, which some might allege is unfamiliar territory for me. In the end, I decided it was an appropriate time and venue to share some of my thoughts and fears concerning the health of our republic today, as well as a prognosis of its capacity to endure in the future should we leave it unattended.

With all that has dramatically changed the political and social fabric of our lives in the last decade and a half, much for the worse in my judgment, I would confess that I sometimes feel like I'm diagonally parked in a parallel universe. Maybe the old adage is true that inside every older person is a younger person wondering what happened. But even though I understand the future is not the past, nonetheless, at this moment in time there are ominous and unmistakable warning signs all around us that our constitutional government, our republic, is at risk.

The most probable way for our republic to vanish is through a lack of honor and fidelity. Not surprisingly that's precisely what's required by our constitutional oath of office. Section 3 of Article III of the Montana Constitution sets forth the only oath required as a qualification of any office or public trust: "I do solemnly swear or affirm that I will support, protect and defend the constitution of the United States, and the constitution of the state of Montana, AND THAT I WILL DISCHARGE THE DUTIES OF MY OFFICE WITH FIDELITY."

What did the framers of our federal and state constitutions, 185 years apart, intend when they chose "fidelity" to be the principle that provides guidance for appropriate behavior by everyone who holds any office or public trust?

And what is this "fidelity" which we hear recited at every swearing-in ceremony, but, in all probability, have rarely stopped to thoughtfully and thoroughly consider? It is, in a word, "faithfulness." Faithfulness to other people; faithfulness to a cause; faithfulness to a shared set of values; and faithfulness to the law as well as our constitutions. And that faithfulness is demonstrated by continuing and unequivocal loyalty and support, without interruption, without exception, without arrogance, without boastfulness, without deceit, without connivance, without trickery and without obfuscation.

The fidelity referred to in our oath presumes not just faithfulness to the actual words of our constitutions, but faithfulness to its spirit as well. A spirit recognized and requited by humility, respect of others, respect for the rights of others, decency, integrity, honor, self-discipline, selflessness, self-examination and common courtesy. Fidelity is the exact opposite of seeking power for its own sake, which history has revealed time and time again to be a fool's errand. As Winston Churchill once remarked, "Dictators ride to and fro upon tigers, which they dare not dismount for the tigers are getting hungry."

Without accepting, embracing and discharging one's duties guided by fidelity, it is inevitable that the life of our republic will, over time, like grains of sand passing through an hourglass, be at risk.

Recall, if you will, the adjournment of the Constitutional Convention in the fall of 1787. Benjamin Franklin, as he exited Freedom Hall was asked: "Do we have a monarchy or a republic?" His response was prophetic: "You have a republic...if you can keep it." That remains, as it did in the beginning, the existential question of our time: Can we keep our republic?

The life of this nation is completely dependent upon every one of us, every day, taking care of and nurturing our democracy. A people who cannot talk or listen to each other, who do not respect each other, who will not sincerely consider the thoughts of each other, who do not trust

each other and who cannot reason with each other, cannot long live in freedom.

Many of us in this room grew up in an America as it used to be...one of the world's most stubbornly civil societies and cultures, where being a neighbor meant more than merely living next door to another family.

Throughout our growing-up years, and into adulthood and a new millennium, we shared a positive attitude about life, about neighbors, about families and about values.

We suspected the best of each other until proven wrong...a sort of presumption of innocence and good faith that was accorded from the beginning and instinctively one to another.

Contrast that with the awkward, thoughtless, poisonous, mean, and frequently inaccurate or false public communications of today, where 360,000 tweets a minute are instantaneously dispatched and received every minute of every hour of every day.

That's how much of the country, and much of the world, talks to each other these days. It's dizzying, vacuous and perilous.

Chances for people with diverse views sitting across a table from one another and talking to each other about how to solve difficult and important problems have been substantially diminished. And now, most of the time, eliminated, in favor of the new mindless electronic rituals that produce infinitely more confusion and anger than understanding.

It seems almost impossible to manage the noise, to control the flood of unverified and frequently inaccurate communications, conceived in rage and competition, and then once dispatched, regretted because all of that hateful blather is now a matter of public record. How is it that we stop this runaway train as it picks up speed and leaves so much disaster and destruction along the way?

The internet is marvelous creation, in so many ways. But it has also strained and stunted our social existence, especially our political affairs, with irresponsible and baseless suggestions of the existence of circumstances and situations that have absolutely no basis in fact.

We have to bring more discipline, integrity and sensitivity to our communications and comments, individually and collectively, to fulfill the requirements of fidelity to one another, fidelity to the cause of freedom and

fidelity to our shared belief in the future of our country and state. The alternative is to witness our way of life being torn apart at the seams.

It's not really a big ask. I'm not suggesting, **hopelessly**, a return to simpler times.

I'm calling, **hopefully**, for a return to simple, timeless and enduring values: presuming the best of each other, listening in good faith before acting or responding, exuding generosity and grace, self-correcting our own mistakes, and being ambitious to accomplish something...not to be somebody.

I'm suggesting that much more can be accomplished practically—and politically—by shunning the tired old rhetorical games of yesteryear, now magnified exponentially and given eternal life by the internet.

I'm suggesting that we focus on caring and listening to each other, gathering the facts before we make up our minds and then actually fixing our society's problems instead of being distracted by the flashing lights, engaging in the to and fro of never-ending, instantaneous, bitter and, all too often, mean and careless electronic communications that can be sent at the speed of light with a silent click to every corner of the planet Earth and beyond at least 360,000 times a minute.

Trust has to be earned, not demanded, inherited or expected. It is the result of a selfless combination of preparation, effort, humility, decency and integrity.

A great deal has been given to us by our birth or presence in this wondrous country and state. And by our acceptance of its bounty, a great deal is expected of each one of us.

Part of our responsibility calls for us to invest our time, individually and repetitively, sharing what we've learned and what we are convinced is critical to the life of a democracy and the endurance of a free people.

That means counting on the collective and individual acts of millions of people, who, while living their own daily lives, encourage their fellow citizens to consider the gravity of this moment and the fragility of our republic.

Democracy is a voluntary association of individuals. To paraphrase a famous movie producer, "If people don't want to come, you can't stop them." It's a dynamic institution, always changing. It can dynamically deteriorate and rot just as quickly as it can dynamically improve.

Even without evil overseas empires to confront and unify us, we face a crucial struggle to preserve our society from within.

We may never be called upon to take up arms to storm a distant beach where survival is unlikely. But, we ARE called upon, even in so-called peacetime, each of us, to do our share of the tending of this garden called democracy.

Each one of us has a duty, a responsibility, to live a life that by its example will be a living, breathing example to those who are deciding, simply by watching and listening, what values and behavior they will choose to embrace.

Despite all of my years in government, I know we cannot turn to government to provide a remedy for what ails us. Yes, government must protect public safety. And, yes, government must provide an array of essential public services.

But government is not some strange occupying force. Government is not “Them.” Government is “Us”, the people who own it, you and I. Our constitutions are social contracts between the people and their governments



wherein every one of us pledges our fidelity: to each other, to the cause of freedom and to the future of our republic.

Sadly, we hear so much about our divisions. We are conditioned by the media to think that we have little in common—as a nation and as a people. But I believe the majority of the American people are tired of the intramural wars where all sides emphasize only their divisions with the hope of having them magnified and instantaneously scattered across the landscape, courtesy of the internet and the propaganda incessantly purveyed by political hucksters for both political parties.

As one precocious Montanan told me at her eighth grade graduation, we are not different groups of people in America. We are, she said, one group of different Americans. One group of different Americans. It would serve us well to remember that.

We've got problems in this country and state. So, us let abandon the solitary and fruitless search for power and control, and get on about fixing our problems and taking care of one another—with fidelity, so help us God.