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When did it become un-American to express doubt? When did it become irrational to express faith? When did flag-waving replace true patriotism? When did disrespect to the office of President become a substitute for faithful opposition?

I find the deep divide running through the country today to be very troubling.

At what point did we stop talking to each other? Does no one see the terrible harm that comes from monologue without dialogue? We listen to each other's words as if merely to gather evidence to be used in court, deaf to the person behind the voice. This behavior has a name: It is prejudice.

Faith is always strengthened in the dialogue with doubt, and doubt can only exist where there is first faith. Any faith that cannot survive adverse opinions, even be generous to them, is not faith at all.

Where we disagree we must talk to one another. But in recent years, one only seems to hear rhetoric designed to stir the emotions. Politicians who paint only in black and white, who demonize the other side, who cannot contemplate compromise (let alone defeat) - such politicians demean us.

We are not children; we know that life can be complicated. We make decisions every day based on contradictory advice and evidence. These monologue-politicians do not serve us. The essence of politics is compromise; but if one characterizes the other side as evil, how can one compromise? Government comes to a halt under such circumstances. Silencing the minority is not the patriotic duty of the majority.

When did the Democratic Party come to represent reason without faith? When did the Republican Party come to represent faith without reason? And when did our faith become the province of politicians looking for a handle on us? When did ending a speech with "God Bless America" become a substitute for honoring The Almighty in the policies expressed in the speech itself? And when did it become un-American to be an atheist?

America is what it is because we are free to express our opinions. Opinions are never harmful; only destructive behaviors are.

For those of us who are Christians, how can we have forgotten what Jesus himself said: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone"? And for those of us who are not Christians, how can we have forgotten how to treat the faith of another with respect?

Belittlement of religion is no proof of rationality: atheists are as prone to irrationality as anyone else.

At the same time, one cannot rule a country with Scripture - for it is designed to save the soul, not be a closing argument for lawyers and politicians.

On the same note, science does not negate the Christian doctrine; nor is every scientist an atheist. Faith and rationality can co-exist in the same person.

There is only one America for all of us. That is why values can be taught at school (and indeed are taught at school) and yet the values of a particular religion should not be. Faith is implicit in all we do. When we make it explicit, especially in the political arena or in the public school classroom, we run the risk of distorting it, and we may end up alienating exactly those whom we wish to reach.

Likewise, when we attack symbolic words which have become part of the public consciousness such as "In God We Trust", and "...one nation, under God..." we once again run the risk of alienating those whom we wish to protect.

We parents do not need strangers to tell our children what to believe - that is our responsibility. Community members, teachers, and politicians can do no more than be models of their beliefs. Children learn by what we do, and not by what we say, in any case.

Those of us who perceive that the country is ailing in some moral sense would do well to remember the medical advice of the Greek physician Hippocrates, the author of the Hippocratic Oath: *First, do no harm.*

It is especially important for Christians and atheists alike to recall that there are many faiths lived by Americans which are non-Christian, possibly even polytheistic. We Americans are also Buddhists, Moslems, Jews, Hindus, and many many others. Running the country according to what one faith believes is un-American. Running the country so that no faith can be expressed is also un-American.

Are we capable of learning from one another? Without doubt. Can we listen to each other and compromise? Yes. Let's start today.

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