



Remarks
of
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"The Regionalist's Season"

"Our Man for All Seasons"

Good morning.

It is a pleasure to be here today and a privilege to have been asked to set a keynote of sorts for the discussions that will follow this talk, and with any luck, this meeting.

Earlier this year each of us lost a friend. Whether you knew him personally or not John Gardner was your friend. He was your friend because you were a fellow American. He was your friend because you were a member of the human race. He was a friend because you and he shared a passion about community. And your friend John was excited about the possibility that you, as an individual and a leader in your community, represent for the advancement of the common good.

John loved his country and all it stood for. He saw its shortcomings and failures and loved it nonetheless because he was in love with what it could become. He was in love with the possibility of America and the American ideal.

In his life he served his country in many ways. Becky Morgan outlined a few of his best known roles yesterday morning. But his most important service, the transcendent characteristic that defined his life and career was his tireless, endless and ever-optimistic advocacy for the realization of the American dream and the noblest of America's ideals.

He knew we were human and therefore imperfect. Indeed, he knew we were incapable of perfection – as individuals, as communities and as a nation. But he was nonetheless energized and excited by the pursuit of the ideal.

He was a man who gave us a challenge – through his life and legacy of good works and noble crusades – to do the best we can to address the major social issues of our times. He lived and left his life confident that women and men of good will would come after him to carry the banner of the common good in the ancient but never-ending march toward the good society.

We owe our friend John Gardner no less. Moreover, we owe no less to ourselves, our community, our nation and our posterity.

"The Contemporary Challenge"

In an address nearly a century ago the American scholar/activist W.E.B. Du Bois observed a timeless truth. "[A]t all time(s)," he said, "human life must be a balance of limited means against infinite ends...and the poverty of human energies and resources forces us always to choose the more weighty and important and let the others wait."

I make that point to underscore my belief that it is not only alright but also entirely proper that we are focused here on regionalism and stewardship. After all, metropolitan regions in the U.S. hold 80% of the national population, account for 84% of all jobs and 85% of the nation's economic output.

We no doubt have a variety of causes between us that arouse our passion and commitment. But we have *in common* a commitment and a shared sense of responsibility to work for solutions to community-specific challenges that can only be achieved regionally. And there is the equally strong motivator to seize opportunities that can only be had in the same way.

The particular challenges and opportunities that bring us here differ from region to region. What each region has in common is the absence of a process for governance, a structure of government, or a tradition of broad-based, multi-sector regional collaboration that each must have to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities.

In probably every case there is some element of misalignment of government with the requirements of the people and their communities. No unit of government has the ways, means, scope or multi-sector linkages to address key regional situations.

We know as well that even a regional government – with unbounded scope and resources – would not be up to the challenge, for the complex challenges our regions face cannot be successfully addressed by government alone. Business must be involved. Civil society in its myriad dimensions must play a role. And most of all the people, who are sovereign and therefore the ultimate source of power, must be involved or at the last give their sanction.

And we know there is no alternative. We share, ultimately, for better or for worse – what Doug Henton has described as, "Interwoven destinies of local and regional places and peoples."

Doug has noted that, "State governments, designed by the federal Framers, are now as distant as the federal government from most individuals and communities." Local governments, I would add, do not have the scope to deal with situations that involve but transcend their area of geographic jurisdiction.

A consequence of this misalignment of government with the people's needs, Doug continues, is that "As individuals lose touch with their governments they become cynical and disengaged from civic affairs."

"The natural place for individuals and communities to come together in the modern world," he concludes, "is increasingly the regional level – a space that is not well defined in our current federal-state-local government system."

These are points worth considering and not just as they relate to the specific challenges and opportunities that we have in our respective regions.

Another great American scholar Robert Hutchins, a former president of the University of Chicago, once observed that when citizens become disengaged from civic affairs sensing that the political life of their community has little connection to the life they lead, when politics is neither guided nor under-girded by a strong political philosophy, politics becomes “nothing but the exercise of power.”

And this is a dangerous situation indeed in our or any democracy, or for that matter, in any form of government.

“Politics,” Mr. Hutchins said, “is and ought to be ... the science of the common good.”

“The common good is a good that accrues to every member of the community because he belongs to it; he would not have it if he did not belong to it. The task of politics,” he concluded, “is to define the common good and to organize the community to achieve it.”

And that, I want to argue from a committed non-partisan stance, is part of what we must consider here. How to revitalize the political life of our community – as it involves the citizen as well as the office seeker – with a commitment to the pursuit of the common good as its highest priority.

“The Lesson of History”

This is hardly the first time Americans have faced such a challenge. It is a challenge that our nation and its civic leaders faced in the infancy of the United States. And how the Founders of our nation and the Framers of our national Constitution dealt with the challenge is instructive.

Let me tell you the familiar story.

Less than five years after the British General Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown the newly independent United States were challenged by internal dissent.

“There were enough interstate brawls,” wrote the eminent historian Samuel Eliot Morison, “to cause great disquiet.”

At the root of the problem was the Articles of Confederation. Put simply, the Articles created a national government that had neither the resources nor the authority to govern the new nation.

Against this backdrop of national gridlock and instability, an armed uprising occurred in western Massachusetts in 1786 led by Daniel Shays, a former captain in the American army in the war for independence. It was a “tipping point” in American history, to use Becky’s phrase, that you will remember from your high school history studies as Shays’ Rebellion.

This uprising by Massachusetts farmers, which was put down by the militia, convinced the nation’s leaders they had to act. The Articles of Confederation were not adequate to meet the challenges or the opportunities of the day. The people were dissatisfied as were the states. A new charter was urgently required if the young nation was to hold together. And so it was that some of the best political minds in the nation came together in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787.

Morison called this period between 1785 and 1788 the “creative period” in early American politics. And oh what a creation the Framers of the Constitution wrought.

The challenge the Framers faced was rooted in self-interest. The states were wary of surrendering any of their sovereign power to a national government. The smaller states were wary of the potential power of the larger ones. The list goes on, as you know.

What the Framers created is an example of the genius that can be found in simplicity. They did not seek to solve every problem, or to choose winners and losers. Each of the states would be equally powerful in the Senate. Population would be the basis for the apportionment of power in the House of Representatives. A powerful national government was created but with tightly circumscribed power. The states and the national government were preeminent in their respective spheres. Each was given the power to do the work only it could do best. And the power of both, in Morison’s words, “rest(ed) on the same broad bottom of popular sovereignty.”

“The Federal Constitution,” Morison continued, “was the capital achievement of this creative period... This reconciling of unity with diversity, this practical application of the federal principle, is undoubtedly the most original contribution of the United States to the history and technique of human liberty.”

“The Federal Convention, which sat in Philadelphia from 25 May to 17 September 1787, drafted the most successful constitution in history,” Morison concluded, “now covering fifty instead of thirteen states, and a population” now in excess of 275 million “as compared with fewer than four million enrolled in the census of 1790.”

When their work was done the Framers had produced a masterpiece. And yet, as Morison observed, “there is little doubt” *opponents* of the Constitution “would have won a Gallup poll.”

So the supporters of the new Constitution swung into action. The people were sovereign in America – just as they are today, a fact we should not forget and one I will return to – so the people had to be convinced that this new structure of government was the wise and necessary course.

Key to the effort to win over the people was a series of essays that appeared in a New York newspaper, *The Independent Journal*. These essays are now known collectively as the Federalist Papers. They were written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay and they made the case to a wary American people that a new structure of governance was needed, that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate to the demands of the day, how the new Constitution addressed the problems the country faced, how it addressed the major concerns of opponents and the numerous competing interest groups in our already diverse nation.

The essays were reprinted in other newspapers and circulated as pamphlets. It was a national civics course. Through it citizens learned what they needed to know to set the stage for change, progress and stability.

Much of the genius of the Constitution lay in what the Framers did not attempt to do. In the words of the 20th century British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, the Framers “had an uncommonly clear grasp of the general ideas that they wanted” in the Constitution and the foresight to leave “the working out of the details to later interpreters.”

Of such work – done by people well prepared for the task, people who understand the need for balance, including most importantly striking the proper balance between what is possible at the time, principles that should endure and ideals that should be aspired to – great political progress is made and sustained.

"Applying History's Lesson"

And yet for all the brilliance and insight that went into its construction, even James Madison, "the master builder of the Constitution" and one of its most ardent advocates in the campaign for ratification, understood that only the people could make it work.

"In Federalist Paper 39," John Gardner wrote in his foreword to Brian O'Connell's compact masterpiece, *Civil Society*, "James Madison candidly admitted that what we were creating was 'a political experiment' and that it depended 'on the capacity of mankind for self-government.'"

John would say if he were with us today that the "American experiment" as he called it continues and today we are responsible for it, we are the leading figures on history's stage.

Is it right for me to apply the word "history" to the work we are doing? Can the work that engages us and brings us together be called "historic?" Should I use the same words to describe the work you are doing in your communities that I use to describe the work of the Framers more than 200 years ago?

I think John would say yes.

"History never looks like history when you are living through it," he wrote in his book *No Easy Victories*. "It always looks confusing and messy, and it always feels uncomfortable."

Confusing. Messy. Uncomfortable. I bet that sounds at least a bit like your work on behalf of your region. I've yet to meet a regionalist – or at least one I would trust – who says, "Everything is going just fine, thank you."

It's tough work, often against entrenched and conflicting centers of power. Figuring out what to do is tough enough. Convincing other stakeholders of the wisdom of your vision frequently seems a distant hope at best.

It is for situations such as these, I believe, that philosophers were created. They don't always tell you the right thing to think, but they frequently point you to the right thing to think about, or how to think about it.

The philosopher George Santayana comes to mind here. Not only was he a philosopher, he was also a poet and a Harvard professor, so we should approach his wisdom with great care.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," he is famous for observing. And that is sage counsel for some situations.

It is also the case, though, that those who do remember the past, who study it and learn from it, can repeat it as well – but with no fear of condemnation and with increased hope for success.

That notion lies at heart of the threshold course of the planned John Gardner Academy for regional stewardship. Through study, reflection and informed, structured dialogue we can bring the hard-earned wisdom of the ages to bear on the challenges we face today. For example, we should remember that "history" as the Framers lived it, attempting to work out the social and political challenges of their day, no doubt seemed exceedingly "confusing and messy" to them and was no doubt equally uncomfortable.

Their situation probably seemed worse to them than ours does to us. After all, who among us has had to contend with an armed rebellion against champions for regional solutions?

We can learn from the experience of the Framers. We can study the possible applications of what they did to our times and our situation. We can and we should.

The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Jack Rakove wrote that when 18th century Americans and their leaders “spoke of learning from experience, they did not mean their own so much as that of previous generations, running all the way back to classical antiquity.”

They studied the writings and insights of Montesquieu, Locke and Hobbes. Their studies reached back all the way to Plato and Aristotle. Their deliberations were thus a part of what another great philosopher, Mortimer Adler, called “the great conversation across the centuries.”

And we can learn from that conversation, build on it, and advance the thinking.

You see, the “American experiment” does continue. We are part of it. Through our conduct in public life and that of our fellow Americans we *are* the experiment.

In our work to advance regional solutions, in our role as responsible stewards, when we draw on what we have “learned from experience” we should not limit ourselves to our experience in our home region, or the experience of our contemporaries in other regions. We can and should approach our work and stewardship responsibilities as the Framers did, drawing on the “experience” and insight, the successes and failures of those who plowed the same fields before us, plowed them back as far as the days of Aristotle and Athenian democracy.

In some ways the task we face – although smaller perhaps in geographic scope and less daunting in terms of precedent – is not unlike that that our forebearers confronted in 1787.

In his book *Civil Society*, published just three years ago, Brian O’Connell quotes his friend John Gardner.

“New patterns of governance are emerging,” John observed. “We use the word governance because it is so clear that government alone cannot bring our communities – or our nation – back to health.”

John observed further that the need is “urgent...for new patterns of collaboration among the governmental, business and non-profit sectors, collaboration that includes neighborhood associations, the professions, labor, minority groups, churches, schools, civic organizations and neighboring governmental jurisdictions.”

James O’Toole wrote another compact gem of a book. It’s called *The Executive’s Compass* and is an overview of timeless ideas drawn from the Aspen Institute’s respected Executive Seminar. In his book O’Toole also quotes our old friend.

“John Gardner describes the challenge in this way:” O’Toole wrote. “The play of conflicting interests in a framework of shared purpose is the drama of a free society. It is a robust exercise and a noisy one, not for the faint-hearted or the tidy-minded.”

Through the Academy we can prepare ourselves for that “robust exercise” that the “faint-hearted” and “tidy-minded” best avoid.

This goes to the heart of what Doug mentioned yesterday about the connection between principle and practice.

Mortimer Adler, a founder of the renowned Aspen Seminar, put it this way: "...though ethical or political wisdom is inadequate for the solution of the practical problems that confront us, it is nevertheless indispensable for achieving sound solutions to them. Universal principles constitute the framework – the broad outline or plan – within which sound solutions can be and must be developed. They point us in the right direction. The framework they provide is like a map that helps us to find our way to our destination, even though it does not tell us everything that we need to know in order to get there."

And there is much that we must learn. And there is much that we should develop the confidence and the ability to share with others as the foundation and the reason for what we do.

In his book on civil society Brian O'Connell gives a good example. "Many of the *threats* to our civil society relate to the misunderstanding of what it is and its relevance to the functions and preservation of democracy," he writes.

"The history of other democracies teaches us that the greatest threat often comes from within – from the inattention and neglect of citizens," O'Connell continues. "Recall Edmund Burke's, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and women] to do nothing.'"

"The Challenge and The Opportunity"

"The American Experiment is still in the laboratory," John Gardner wrote in his foreword to O'Connell's book, "And there could be no nobler task for our generation than to move the great effort along."

And, I would add humbly, no greater responsibility than to keep it from failing.

The American experiment has always been an experiment that could fail. Americans like you have always worried that the experiment might fail and they have always found a way to keep it moving forward toward the bright and constant North Star of our highest ideals.

This has been true through all the days of the Republic.

John Adams received a letter from a correspondent in 1786 who wrote, "No people ever had a fairer opportunity to be what they anxiously wished to be – none ever neglected their interest more."

"From the seeds of division among us, much is to be dreaded."

Recall Abraham Lincoln's words spoken on the Gettysburg battlefield:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

And consider, finally, the words of Brian O'Connell in his book published just three years ago.

"[D]espite my general optimism I worry, and most of what I worry about is whether 250 years beyond our founding it is really practical to expect that people will realize that it could still come apart and whether they will do everything possible to keep that from happening.

"Though it seems eminently logical that rational people would never let such a democracy unravel, I've been around long enough and read enough to know that people and history can be tragically irrational.

"I find myself worrying what the consequences would be if in the course of the new century we experience a worsening of such factors as selfishness, taking liberty for granted, governmental limits on citizen participation, the influence of special interests on public officials, separation between the haves and have nots, intolerance, and incivility. How much deterioration of our civil society would it take to weaken democracy irreparably?

"Gibbon's observation on the decline of Athenian democracy keep ringing in my ears...

"In the end, more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security. They wanted a comfortable life and they lost it all – security, comfort and freedom...When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free."

And so it falls to us in our time to keep the "American Experiment" and the American Dream alive and moving forward. Remember, and never forget, Becky's recitation yesterday of John Gardner's essential message to us all:

"Freedom and Responsibility, Liberty and Duty – That's the Deal."

* * *

Yesterday morning Becky Morgan recalled that at the first forum the Alliance held they settled on a definition of stewardship. She told us it was "careful and responsible management" of that which has been entrusted to our care.

Ponder all that that implies and requires. Ask yourself, "Who are the stewards of our time?"

As we look across our communities it is obvious that not all of us can be stewards. For many the circumstance and challenges of their lives will not permit it. There will be others who can do but choose not to. Their passions lie elsewhere.

That means that those few who remain – and I suspect that number includes most if not all in this room – must be stewards. The need is undeniable, the opportunity is at hand, and our time is now.

To be good and effective stewards is not an easy thing. It is not a title. It is a way of approaching life, and our role in our community and our society. It is a responsibility for which

we must prepare ourselves. We must prepare ourselves at the same high level that those who came before us were prepared.

I am reminded here of James O'Toole's description of the stewards – or guardians as they were called – in Plato's "ideal Republic."

"The characteristics of this leadership elite," O'Toole wrote, "are their knowledge, wisdom, competence, talent, and ability..." They are people who "rule not for themselves, but for the good of society as a whole."

To be a responsible and effective steward one must be steeped in great ideas. And what, in this context, are great ideas?

In his book *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*, Jacob Needleman describes "great ideas" as ones that "unify people and...act to unify the disparate parts of the human being; they speak of a social order that is possible on the basis of an ordering within the individual self."

The great ideas include what John Stuart Mill described as "not a set of model institutions but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstance might be deduced."

What more do stewards need?

Well, to the extent that stewards are leaders too, Brian O'Connell argues they "need to have these characteristics:

1. "A passionate belief in participatory democracy, including the multiplication of participants and the dispersion of power.
2. "A capacity both to enlarge and to survive the democratic cacophony in order to hear the individual shrieks – and songs.
3. "An ability to educate the public, including the single-issue players, so that we are all better informed of the relationships between our special interests and the larger society in which those interests must be pursued."

Thinking through and drawing on an extraordinarily extensive e-mail correspondence with Doug Henton I would add the following:

- The first principle among first principles for stewards must be a keen awareness of the sovereignty of the American people. It must be the foundation and the key organizing principle for all we do.
- Responsible and effective stewards need to understand these additional points of Doug Henton's:
 - "We need a government that is as innovative as our economy and society.
 - "Governance is about people and relationships not structure.
 - "Place matters because people seek quality community, quality communities attract creative people and creative people drive the innovation economy.
 - "Economy, environment and equity go together – you cannot have one without the other: economic vitality, social inclusion and quality of life create a vital cycle."
- And if you forget or come to doubt any of the foregoing go back to the first principle. The American people are sovereign. They are the foundation for all we do and the ultimate source of power in our nation.

Brian O'Connell would agree, I think. In his book he quotes Thomas Jefferson, who said: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society, but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

That is what the Federalist Papers were about – informing the sovereign American people.

As Doug Henton has observed, a modern equivalent, The Regionalist Papers, could serve an important function. They can, he said, "help stimulate dialogue about the first principles for a form of regional governance based on a new social contract that better connects individual choice with regional decisions based on what we know works."

I would add that as we think of Regionalist Papers let us not think of them solely, or even primarily as a tool regional stewards use to learn from one another. Think of them more importantly as a tool that helps and prepares us to make the case to the people that change is necessary, that new and innovative approaches to governance must be tried, that the "American Experiment" continues, and in the end only the sovereign people of America can determine its result and its future.

Brian O'Connell points to the book *Voice and Equality* whose authors suggest that, "In a fuller participatory democracy, political activity becomes a mechanism whereby citizens engage in enlightened discourse, come to understand the views of others, and become sensitized to the needs of the community and nation. Thus educated, they transcend their own interests to seek the public good..."

The authors' words about an educated citizenry hearken back to those of Jefferson.

For so many who have steeped themselves in the "great ideas" considerations of pursuing the common good in America always began and end with her sovereign people.

The United States of America was born then with the assumption that in this new country, which was both a democracy and a republic, the ultimate power and the ultimate responsibility for the course of the government and the fate of the nation would rest with the people themselves.

Once again, John Gardner speaks from the pages of Brian O'Connell's book.

"One might imagine that the straightforward path to repair the civic faith of Americans would be to make government worthy of their faith. But the plain truth is that government (and other powerful institutions) will not become worthy of trust until citizens take positive action to hold them to account.

"Citizen involvement comes first."

"Advocacy is equally important," Gardner said, "Voting is of course the most basic form and low voter turnout is distressing. But advocacy should extend far beyond the voting booth...Government needs the goading and support that citizens supply ... Tough-minded politicians know that citizens can make a difference."

Let me pause here for just a moment before I close.

Part of the work we need to do in the drive for change involves organizing what we have come to call the "grassroots." We all want to build a "grassroots movement" for change.

But keep in mind as you do, as you contend with elected officials who are in love with their power and opposed to any change that might diminish it, that almost every blade of grass in a "grassroots movement" is a sovereign American citizen, and if not a citizen they are sovereigns of the human race.

"Top down won't work" as Becky said yesterday. But sovereign up will. That is this country's "great idea."

This talk, which drew appreciatively on the work of so many others, particularly Brian O'Connell whose book I strongly recommend, is obviously part tribute and part promise to a friend to us all, a friend to America and to the human race – John Gardner.

And I can think of no more appropriate words to close with than his.

"Leaders today," he said, "are familiar with the demand that they come forward with a new vision. But it is not a matter of fabricating a new vision out of whole cloth. A vision relevant for us today will build on values deeply embedded in human history and in our own tradition. It is not as though we come to the task unready. Men and women from the beginning of history have groped and struggled for various pieces of the answer. The materials out of which we build the vision will be the moral strivings of the species, today and in the distant past.

"Most of the ingredients of a vision for this country have been with us for a long time. As the poet wrote, "The light we sought is shining still." That we have failed and fumbled in some of our attempts to achieve our ideals is obvious. But the great ideas still beckon – freedom, equality, justice, the release of human possibilities. The vision is to live up to the best in our past and to reach the goals we have yet to achieve – with respect to our domestic problems and our responsibilities worldwide."

Thank you.