

Coalition for American Renewal National Symposium, Atlanta, GA, United States

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Young Jun Kim on behalf of Hyun Jin Moon

Distinguished faith leaders, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning. It is very meaningful that this Coalition for American Renewal National Symposium is being convened here in Atlanta at this critical time. The issues to be discussed are of great importance, as our nation faces significant challenges at home and abroad. On the one hand, our interconnected world can erupt in conflict and violence with bewildering intensity when religious sensitivities and emotions are provoked. At same time, the barrage of political messages during this campaign season heightens the sense that we have become a highly polarized and fragmented people, with dim prospects of solving problems collaboratively.

In my view, it is significant that faith leaders from different perspectives and backgrounds have convened here to discuss issues that play out in the civic square, both domestically and globally. While contentious issues usually involve political dynamics, solutions can be most readily found by beginning from principles and values. Given the wisdom common to our various traditions, faith leaders who recognize our shared responsibility to the common good can contribute to solutions in unique and innovative ways.

Strong political rivalries are not new to our public discourse. While political divisions contribute to our polarized environment today, in fact the root cause is more fundamental. Politics has its place in civil society, but America's overall health does not begin and end in the weighing of political fortunes.

In fact our nation did not come into existence as a result of an election. America was given birth through the declaration of certain transcendent principles. Those "self-evident truths" were to form the foundation of a new nation in which common commitment to shared ideals and values would bind us together as one nation under God.

Those same principles and values inspired great acts of courage and self-sacrifice throughout our history, and were the catalyst for grand achievements. If at times we would stray from the path of justice and truth, our principles and values would point the way back to the fertile ground of liberty.

Unfortunately today the awareness and teaching of these founding ideals has been on the wane. As a result, a modern and more diverse America is less able to recognize what defines our unique national identity and makes us one people. The current polarized environment has resulted from the breakdown of consensus around shared values. That consensus was to be forged through our common awareness of the essential meaning of our founding principles and the fundamental values implicit in them.

We need to re-establish a firm and widespread understanding of those sacred principles as a vital first step toward renewing America. To heal our nation and bind it together again, a great awakening is needed that rekindles our vision, sense of providence, and common purpose. For as expressed in Proverbs so long ago, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

America's Core Principles

I firmly believe that America is exceptional because of its core principles. As an American by choice who has traveled throughout the world, I have gained a unique perspective that has helped me to recognize and appreciate the distinctive genetic code of America's greatness. Of course, it was in the Declaration of Independence that these ideas were first codified.

The idea that our rights are endowed to us by God is the first important principle of American exceptionalism. Throughout the world, human value had been determined either by external factors such as class, race, cultural mores or family lines, or sometimes even by arbitrary means, as when assigned by the fiat or whim of an all-powerful despot.

In contrast to that, the American Declaration asserts that God directly endowed each individual with an intrinsic authority and claim to rights. This authority cannot be usurped by any earthly power. A just government, therefore, is one that derives its authority from the governed, and functions to secure the blessings of liberty for all.

The Declaration pronounces a second essential core value of American exceptionalism - that all people are created equal. In stating that we are "created" equal, it asserts that our intrinsic value is forever linked to the Creator's motives and intentions in having created us. The faith traditions of America's founders had revealed to them that God's motive for creating pertained to love. The equality of humanity, pronounced in the Declaration, is an intrinsic value established by the parental character of God's love for every human being.

Further, to be an American, does not require a particular racial makeup, cultural or religious background. America is about transcendent principles, intrinsic values and self-evident truths. It is the consensus forged around these shared values that is the glue that binds our nation of diversity together to stand as “one nation under God.”

America’s founding documents established a model of groundbreaking importance, acknowledging the Creator as the source of our inalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence, and creating a system that recognizes the primary authority of the people in the Constitution. America is first and foremost about ideas, so of particular importance is the First Amendment, guaranteeing our freedom of expression and religion, and setting a precedent that has made a global impact for the essential freedoms of speech, conscience, and worship everywhere.

The Spiritual Roots of America’s Heritage

In my view, the most important dimension of America’s historical background is its spiritual heritage. The early Americans were firm believers that the hand of God was intimately involved in the affairs of humanity. In believing that God is good, their faith caused them to envision an ultimate destiny of goodness and fulfillment. Thus, reliance on divine providence was their guiding light through trying times.

America’s first settlers saw themselves modeled after the pilgrims of the bible, linking their quest with biblical figures such as Abraham, Moses and the children of Israel. They too were called by God with the vision of a heavenly nation of freedom and deliverance; a nation for the glory of God to be proudly lifted up as a shining city upon a hill and a beacon of hope for the world.

The story of America’s first English settlers is well known. But we should also remember that America had another “pilgrim” narrative. Although less recognized, in my view it is equally significant to America’s spiritual heritage. These forgotten “pilgrims” came not by choice but through coercion, chained in pitch darkness to the hull-bottoms of slave ships. Those vessels were christened with names like “John the Baptist” and “Brotherhood;” somehow oblivious to the cruel hypocrisy in such names, given their wicked and inhumane purpose.

These other American pilgrims found a different path toward the shining city of freedom. It was one that resonated with the suffering path of Christ. While bearing the chains of slavery, they had discovered in the story of Jesus, a divine promise; that there is a redemptive power in the path of undeserved suffering. Their hopes for liberty, justice and equality for all, were firmly anchored in that faithful vision.

Though on different paths, all of these pilgrims, men and women of faith, are the forbears of the American dream. Long before the Declaration was penned, these pioneers had planted deep roots of faith, believing that the promise of liberty is given to all. Their faith carried them through trials and tribulations in pursuit of that promise, in the process forming the deep and varied spiritual heritage of this nation. The fulfillment of that dream remains a work in progress, requiring our continued leadership and investment to make it a living reality.

I firmly believe that God has blessed America not for itself but for the sake of the world. As a “shining city upon a hill,” America is to give hope to all as a model of a unified world. America is to be a place where people of all races and backgrounds can discover the deeper basis of human value; that “under God” all have been endowed, equally, with the same essential rights. America is meant to be a living demonstration that all people of the world are to be one family under God. It should bequeath to the world these self-evident truths that have defined America’s unique contributions to religious freedom, innovation and prosperity, and the principles of just governance. Blessings are meant to be shared with all.

Common Mission for American Renewal

Recognizing this, we naturally must consider whether our nation today is aligned with God’s hope for America. In fact, observing the history of similar nations so commissioned by God, we could conclude that a nation’s fortunes will rise or fall in direct proportion to having accommodated or frustrated God’s purpose.

So where does America today stand? Are we on the right path? Is America a moral and ethical nation that pleases God? Have we been true to the covenant and exceptional path that God had sealed with our forbears? If we make an honest assessment, I believe that we must conclude that America is far short of those expectations, and in dire need of renewal. In fact, to right our path should be the highest priority for every leader of faith in America.

America’s faith leaders should be the stewards and evangelists of God’s hope for America; our national purpose. It is their duty to acknowledge and articulate that God has a purpose and providence for America

today. Together we have a common mission to address three important areas of concern.

First we must address the unchecked rise of God-denying ideas and behavior. The impact of America's popular culture that promotes unfettered appetites and desires is speeding the nation to the precipice of moral collapse. Only if we stand together can we reverse this trend. American public life should be strengthened under the guiding light of virtues rooted in America's faith traditions.

Second, we must address the lack of trust and cooperation between those who affirm a belief in God. Differences in denomination and faith tradition, race and culture have caused us to remain separate. Yet, people of faith have much in common, especially regarding basic human and family values. It is vitally important that people of faith work in common cause to promote shared values, so that in partnership we can exert a focused and positive moral influence on the public life of our nation.

Third, we must address the dire impact on youth resulting from moral confusion and the breakdown of the family. We must uplift and strengthen the family as the spiritual cornerstone of society, essential to molding good character and shared values for succeeding generations. We need moral and innovative leadership with vision and clear ideals that inspire and guide our youth.

The Coalition for American Renewal can be instrumental in addressing these great tasks toward the fulfillment of our national purpose. A leadership network like CAR can play a significant role in mobilizing a grassroots movement that effectively engages the shared values and common concerns of America's diverse faith communities into the civic square. From the town halls of Main Street America, to the halls of power in our nation's capital, CAR can give voice to the concerns and moral suasion to the recommendations of this great force for good found in men and women of faith across our nation.

On a very practical level, I believe that CAR should highlight the significance of the First Amendment and champion its proper application. That means first of all to promote the inclusion and proper role of faith in our public discourse, engaging the dynamic interaction of faith communities in building consensus on shared values. That is the common mission of all people of faith in working together toward the greater good of an ethical society. At the same time, religious freedom is our sacred right, and we should uplift and uphold our First Amendment guarantees to freedom of worship and expression. A dynamic civic square that includes the contributions of faith communities building consensus on values, combined with robust and diverse expressions of religious freedom, provides a rich environment for the fruits of liberty to flourish.

I applaud and encourage the efforts of the Coalition for American Renewal to awaken the spirit and commitment of our citizens to address the serious challenges before us. Engaging, organizing and mobilizing people of faith and conscience in grassroots initiatives that put our principles into action is a timely and essential undertaking. The re-awakening of America to its sense of providence and resolve to be an effective model for a pluralistic society that honors God has major implications not only for the USA but the entire hemisphere and world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am joining today in that call for awakening. As faith leaders let us take up our common mission to awaken the American spirit and character, that together we can rise above political and other divides, and build an America that lives up to its founding ideals.

May God bless you and your families.