WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN TODAY: VOICES OF A NEW GENERATION

CNL ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

MAY 2026

FOREWORD

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

The key rationale for public education in the United States is, in the words of educator Albert Shanker, to "teach children what it means to be an American."[1] By that, he meant the shared values found in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This practice serves two purposes: it transmits an appreciation for the values of liberal democracy, which are not inborn and need to be taught to each generation anew; and it provides the glue necessary to hold together a people of astonishingly different racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and ideological backgrounds.

By this measure, educators need to be doing a better job. In a 2023 YouGov poll, 31% of youth ages 18-29 agreed that "Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government" (compared to only 5% of those over 65).[2] Likewise, a 2025 Gallup survey showed just 53% of those ages 18-29 agreed that "democracy is the best form of government," compared with 80% of older Americans.[3] As Danielle Allen of Harvard University put it: "You can't have a democracy unless people want one. And right now, the kids don't particularly want a democracy."[4]

Young Americans are also less bound together by a common pride in their country. In a 2023 Gallup poll, only 18% of 18- to 34-year-olds said they were "extremely proud to be American," compared with 50% of adults over 55.[5] A recent Democracy Fund poll asked Americans if the Founders were better described as "heroes" or "villains."[6] Only one in 10 Baby Boomers said "villains," while four in ten Gen Z respondents did.

Given the stark generational divide that has emerged over a commitment to democracy and belief in America, it's particularly inspiring to read the three essays of young Americans found in this report.

In this, the 250th year since the nation's founding, the American Identity Project of the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) partnered with its sister organization, the Center for New Liberalism (CNL), to sponsor a nationwide essay contest on what it means to be an American today. The American Identity Project,[7] whose advisory board is co-chaired by David Brooks and William Galston, is making recommendations about how to strengthen a shared American identity in an era of deep division. The Center for New Liberalism is a grassroots organization of young pragmatic liberals with more than 80 local chapters worldwide.[8]

The three winners of the contest — Jaxson Shealy (a Gen Z, originally from Coppell, Texas, and now living in Washington D.C.), Edward Weinberg (a millennial, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), and Armond Halbert (a millennial, of Chicago, Illinois) — offer heartfelt and stirring accounts that embody a reflective (rather than knee-jerk) American patriotism.

Shealy speaks to the special role of immigrants in shaping what it means to be an American. Over the years, as immigration quotas were abolished, “it became possible for nearly anyone on Earth to become an American, a feature unique to our national identity.” He tells the story of his great-grandfather, who fled religious persecution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to begin “a life where opportunity outpaced subordination, civil protections existed for religion and free speech, and freedom stood as the highest virtue.” America had (and has) its problems and its tensions, but the liberal democratic system “channeled conflict into argument rather than bloodshed.”

Weinberg, paradoxically, discovered what it means to be an American by moving abroad. He had thought of himself primarily as a writer, a Jew, and a resident of New Jersey; he “didn’t know I was American until I moved to Vietnam.” There, when he told residents he came from the United States, “their eyes would light up. They wanted to study there. They had a cousin there. They loved the TV show Friends.” Having traveled to 40 countries, Weinberg says no one “better integrates as many different cultures as the U.S.,” by incorporating minority voices into the national dialogue rather than crushing dissent. The U.S. can and should teach about our nation’s crimes in school, Weinberg says, but also that it’s a country that has saved millions of lives annually through its aid programs.

Halbert, meanwhile, reflects upon how being the son of a U.S. military officer helped teach him what it means to be an American. His father served in the Air Force for 30 years and swore loyalty not to any president, but to the country. It’s a lesson all of us should take in, Halbert says, especially when our chosen candidate for the nation’s chief executive loses. “Democracy is not a single moment of victory or defeat,” he writes, “but an ongoing conversation among citizens about the kind of society we want to build together.”

Taken together, the three essays remind us that an abiding patriotism can be found in the Democratic as well as the Republican Party. And yet that is not how the public sees it. Democrats suffer a patriotism deficit in American politics. A November 2024 PPI poll found working-class voters believed Republicans were the more patriotic party by a 19-point margin.[9]

Shealy, Weinberg, and Halbert offer a positive vision from which Democrats, and all Americans, can learn. Indeed, we hope these essays will spark broader discussions among young people and Americans of all ages about what it means to be an American. To that end, this report’s afterword, written by CNL’s cofounder and director, Colin Mortimer, lays out some specific plans for how the conversation can continue throughout the 250th anniversary of our country, and beyond.

Richard D. Kahlenberg is the Director of the American Identity Project at the Progressive Policy Institute, where he is working to strengthen American identity through public education. He is the author or editor of 20 books, including *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at America's Colleges*.

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IF YOU CAN KEEP IT

Essay Winner, First Place

By Jaxson Shealy

Originally from Coppell, Texas, currently living in Washington, D.C.

In 1906, at the age of eleven, my great-grandfather left his family and home in the small city of Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, then occupied by Austria-Hungary but nominally Ottoman territory. Later in life, he claimed that, amid a wave of ethnic violence, he'd been marked for death by local authorities after telling friends he wanted to avenge his father, who had been killed by Ottoman migrants for refusing to change his religion.

Upon hearing this, his mother wrote to relatives in Chicago, asking whether or not he could move there to avoid persecution. At the end of their reply, they wrote simply: “Send him here.” After traveling alone from one city to the next — Dubrovnik, Zagreb, Trieste — he managed to get on a ship headed to Ellis Island. I like to imagine that after days of reflecting on what he was leaving behind and where he was going, seeing the Statue of Liberty and the unusually tall buildings rising behind her gave him hope despite the adversity of his forced migration.

Beneath her, modestly inscribed in bronze, was Emma Lazarus’ poem, The New Colossus. In her words, my great-grandfather thus followed the beacon lit by the “Mother of Exiles” to guide “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” through the “golden gate.” This was the end of a life mired in the same ethnic, religious, and civil violence that plunged Europe into the First World War. This was the beginning of a life where opportunity outpaced subordination, civil protections existed for religion and speech, and freedom stood as the highest virtue. This was the start of an American dream.

Though ethnic tension would understandably continue to be everpresent in the melting pot, as evidenced by his anglicizing his name from Pejovic to Peyson, he would go on to learn English, get an education, open a successful tax and real estate firm, start a family, and offer free tax assistance and English lessons to Balkan immigrants in the north side of Chicago, where he would live until age 92.

This was the story of my great-grandfather, but it is also the story of most non-Indigenous American families at some point in their history. Excluding the tragic history of forced migration, every American family was once an immigrant family. Whether by voyage, trek, or flight, someone had to cross into the jurisdiction of this land to become American. Despite the danger, sorrow, isolation, and struggle, someone decided that the trip was worth it.

After more than two centuries of inviting the world to participate in our system, to build within it and expand opportunity, it became possible for nearly anyone on Earth to become American, a feature unique to our national identity. This is because our identity is defined more by creed than by race, ethnicity, or religion — something the country had to struggle to define. This creed centers on a set of political values enshrined in our founding documents, elaborated upon through American political discourse, and internalized by each of us through education and culture.

There are many adjectives to describe the core set of the creed’s values, but none capture what’s uniquely American better than ”freedom” and its synonyms. Though our history is marked by contradictions to this

creed, the pursuit of freedom has overwhelmingly become our defining national mission. Though we falter, conflict has repeatedly driven efforts to bring our political values closer and closer to practice. An American values freedom deeply and recognizes the importance of granting it to others to pursue their own ends. From this primary virtue flows our reverence for civil rights and liberties.

From a system that protects liberty emerged the cultivation of opportunity. When the restraints of older political systems are removed, it falls to the free citizen to identify their own strengths, pursue their own ambitions, and build something for themselves. When people fall, we have decided they deserve another chance, and that the pooled resources of the public, administered by the government, should help them back up.

Liberty, then, carries with it a twin virtue: responsibility. Once he arrived in this country, my great-grandfather took advantage of every opportunity available to better himself and to create opportunities for others. On a broader scale, the United States led the way in demonstrating that market capitalism could generate broadly shared prosperity, inspiring other nations to experiment with similar systems.

Yet throughout the nation’s history, another ideal, planted in the Declaration of Independence and institutionalized in the Constitution, grew into an increasingly powerful force: equality. The claim that “all men are created equal” was radical for its time, a deliberate decision to elevate a moral ideal above a deeply unequal world. Across generations, those words gathered weight, and through profound conflict, the United States moved toward a society of greater legal and civic equality first across ethnicity, and later, race and gender. While the economic outcomes of this promise remain contested, much of the constitutional framework is now in place.

Therefore, the American Dream is carried forward by those who hold freedom, responsibility, and equality as core political values. From these principles flow our other commitments, including democracy: to truly respect another's freedom and equality requires granting them an equal voice in governance.

However, there are two enduring ways Americans have understood national identity. The first defines America primarily by its creed and holds that those who sincerely commit to these values can become American. The second places greater emphasis on heritage, arguing that shared history, cultural continuity, and collective memory are essential to sustaining the nation and that those more deeply rooted in this inheritance bear a special responsibility for its preservation.

This second view is often associated with nationalist or nativist instincts, though it is not reducible to hostility toward immigrants or outsiders. Rather, it reflects concern that a nation cannot endure without a common story and a sense of gratitude for what has already been built. From this perspective, America is less an unfinished contradiction than a hard-won achievement, one deserving of stewardship rather than perpetual indictment.

The creed-based view, by contrast, emphasizes that American identity has always been aspirational. It holds that the country’s legitimacy rests not in ancestry but in principles, and that criticism of America’s history is often an expression of faith in its founding promises rather than rejection of them. On this account, to believe deeply in the American creed is already, in an important sense, to be American, perhaps even when legal recognition lags behind moral commitment.

American identity has always been forged through tension between these two perspectives. The health of the nation depends not on the victory of one over the other, but on their continued coexistence. The creed has never been realized through consensus alone, it has emerged from conflict across generations of stability and crisis. Once again, we find ourselves at a juncture where what it means to be American is being renegotiated.

Because dissent is itself a defining American practice, these competing visions deserve to be taken seriously. The heritage-centered view raises real questions: How much continuity does a nation require to survive? What obligations do citizens owe to the sacrifices of prior generations? The creed-centered view raises equally serious ones: Who gets to belong, and on what basis? How should Americans judge a history that contains both extraordinary achievement and profound injustice? These questions are not distractions; they are the fault lines along which American politics has always developed.

Resolving these questions conclusively would require passing final judgment on the United States — a task too vast for any single essay. People disagree because they weigh these questions differently, not because one side lacks reason or good faith. In a country built to hold deep disagreement within a shared political framework, understanding this matters. History warns that when tolerance for dissent erodes, civil conflict becomes more likely, as the Civil War grimly demonstrates.

For this reason, we must remind ourselves that, in addition to those mentioned, pluralism is essential to democratic stability and should thus be taken as a core political value. As Abraham Lincoln warned, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” The danger is not disagreement itself, but the refusal to tolerate it. When disagreement is managed through pluralism, conflict remains political rather than existential, allowing Americans to argue over identity without threatening the republic.

Disagreements over values should not obscure those we continue to share. Americans have always argued about who we are and what we owe one another. The question is whether we can continue to do so without destroying what previous generations built.

My great-grandfather fled violence born of intolerance. What he found in America wasn't a nation without conflict. It was a system that channeled conflict into argument rather than bloodshed. He anglicized his name and learned English, not because America demanded conformity in itself, but because these adaptations were the price of integrating into a society that, unlike others at the time, would accept him as an equal regardless of where he came from.

That promise remains, but only if we protect the pluralism that sustains it. Freedom, responsibility, and equality are values that define us, even when we disagree about everything else. If we abandon our tolerance for that disagreement, we become unworthy of the inheritance my great-grandfather and millions like him worked so hard to claim. The American Dream survives not when we all think alike, but when we defend each other's right to think differently. An American is one who defends that dream.

FINDING AN AMERICAN IDENTITY

Essay Winner, Second Place

By Ed Weinberg
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I didn’t know I was American until I moved to Vietnam 15 years ago.

Throughout my life, there were a number of things I’d called myself first. I’m from New Jersey. I’m a writer. I’m Jewish. I’m a forest steward. I’m a cat owner.

American? Just when I have to do my taxes.

When I moved to Vietnam, I said that I was American, shyly. I let my Swedish girlfriend lead the introductions — which she did, impressively, in Vietnamese. The most frequent reaction among locals was blank looks.

When I would say that I was American, their eyes would light up. They wanted to study there. They had a cousin there. They loved the TV show Friends.

The U.S. wasn’t an imperial foe to these people. It was a horizon, it was the world.

And sure, I also found that a bit cringey. It’s a very America-centric way of viewing the world. But the inverse — believing that the U.S. isn’t special — is also untrue.

The U.S. isn’t the land of dreams, and it isn’t the land of nightmares. That’s its own kind of America-centrism.

I lived in Vietnam when McDonald’s and Starbucks first opened in the country. By then, I’d been there long enough to see what they represented to Vietnamese people — not a soulless corporate mediocrity robbing the world of its distinctness, but admission to a world that had only been seen on TV.

Getting a red carpet invite to the McDonald’s grand opening didn't make me patriotic. It made me curious — and a little embarrassed by how narrow my own story was.

There’s a corollary to this narrow story: If the U.S. does things wrong, then other places must do things better. And indeed I do feel that, at least in some ways.

Seven years after my Vietnam experience, I still feel it like a phantom limb. Walking through West Philadelphia on a winter night and not seeing another person for whole blocks feels lonely to me — and impossible to conceive of in Vietnam. To me, the ever-present Vietnamese street life feels like community and participation; to see these uninhabited Philadelphia streets feels like a rejection of these things.

Of course, the truth isn't so simple. In Vietnam, most people I knew lived with their parents. They would leave the house to find their own space.

To those who appreciate a more connected world, the multi-generational households common in Vietnam have a pull. They're the cure for so much that ails us — disconnected families, parents struggling to find childcare, and elders growing isolated and purposeless.

But in Vietnam, I saw the opposite attraction. People wanted to live on their own. They wanted the lonely, weird, expensive lifestyle that many Americans have. But they couldn't afford it.

I had a really hard time saying, "No, you shouldn't want that. It's not good. Westerners don't want that." Because we do.

Being American gives us the option to separate, to become more ourselves, to define our own space. And that option is seductive enough that people reach for it even when they can see the costs.

Behind the double-edged sword of individualism is an ideal that's hard to shake. The ideal says that you can choose your destiny, and then bring that self into the world. This is tricky, and it doesn't work for everyone — but that dream is an exciting thing to those without that choice.

Us Americans know the shadow side of the dream, and we're sick of hearing about the good sides. For a long time, "being American" was conditional: for many people, it meant assimilation, sanding off your cultural edges, accept someone else's definition of normal. What's changed is that more people now have enough voice to contest the definition and to demand co-ownership.

This is the source of significant friction. But I've been to 40 countries, and I haven't seen one that better integrates as many different cultures as the U.S.

Living abroad taught me that other countries have these conflicts, too. The way they often solve them is by denying their minorities voice, or crushing them when they speak up too loudly.

Critics of the myth of American exceptionalism often look longingly at these more homogenous countries, seeing something that we lack. And indeed, a place like Vietnam has a much stronger, more obvious culture. The shadow side of that is a lack of tolerance for those who don't fit the culture.

The U.S. suffers from a moral provincialism that one would think we'd moved past. It makes sense on one level — with great power comes great responsibility. When the U.S. does things like eliminate USAID programs with no warning, it creates shockwaves in the world; one estimate puts the number of lives at risk from these canceled programs at 14 million over the next five years. The part that critics never seem to acknowledge is the extraordinary fact that we were on track to save 14 million lives over five years. Thinking the U.S. is uniquely broken is a failure of imagination, about both others and ourselves.

American conflicts are visible because we allow them to be. Instead of burying our crimes, we teach them in schools. This is halfway to the repair work needed to fulfill the American promise.

The American practice isn't in agreement. It's refusing to settle disputes through silence, exile, or violence, and choosing instead to keep arguing inside the same shared project.

As anyone with an internet connection can tell you, this shared concept is under threat. Nine years ago, career diplomat Keith Mines published an article in Foreign Policy measuring our chances of civil war at 60% in the next 10–15 years. We checked most of the boxes of the conditions that have meant war for other countries.

And yet, it hasn't happened. Either it's coming, or there's something unusually resilient about us.

There are scales to the self-inflicted horrors of nationalism, and living abroad gave me a way to see ours in proportion. When I had something to compare American shortcomings to — like learning about the unacknowledged deportation of 450,000 ethnic Chinese people from their generational homes in Vietnam on the outbreak of war with China — I felt pride of a kind that our internment of Japanese citizens eventually led to an apology and compensation.

Every country has horrible, violent crimes in its history. The best that any country has ever been able to achieve is accountability.

This is the messy work of people living together at scale. Our history is full of collisions because we've allowed more opportunity for collisions to happen, and we have more people empowered enough to seek justice afterward. What scares us is that these collisions feel like they might break us — like our civic life is unsustainable. But there's another way to read it: either collapse is coming, or we've been stress-tested by pluralism enough to withstand this latest challenge.

People get political when things don't work. A lot of stuff doesn't work here. But the things I've come to associate with the U.S. — the things people value outside of the U.S. — those aren't necessarily political. They're the background conditions that let a lot of different lives be lived.

Our national narcissism swings between "we're the greatest" and "we're the worst." Maturity is stepping out of that — valuing ourselves with humility, not denying our failings, and not letting our failings define the whole of who we are.

What struck me most about Vietnam was simpler than politics. People believe their lives are good, and that the world is a good place to live in. It's the kind of belief we used to carry in the days when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." They hold a story about themselves that matters more than the problems in it.

We have a harder story to tell — one that includes more people, more voices, more claims on the narrative. We've let our challenges define us. Now we need to find our story again — one honest enough to include our failures and generous enough to let us believe in what comes next. That's the work ahead.

THE ORDINARY PATRIOT

Essay Winner, Third Place

By Armand Halbert

Chicago, Illinois

Eleven-year-old me did not want to go to school. *"You can't make me,"* I whined. *"It's my right to do what I want!"* My dad, bemused, sat me down with his copy of the Constitution and read each amendment to the Bill of Rights to me. He then explained what they meant and why they were important. There wasn't a "skip school" amendment, much to my disappointment.

It was just a quirky parenting tactic, yet it made a great impression on me. I learned from my dad that citizens have certain rights, that government derives from the consent of the governed, and that we govern ourselves. That day, my father taught me the standard civics lessons all Americans learn. But the most valuable lessons came not from what he said but from what he did.

My dad served in the Air Force for over 30 years, starting at the Air Force Academy, becoming a pilot, and rising to the rank of colonel. His service is a point of pride for him. But he also taught me what it meant to be an American through everyday acts of citizenship.

When I was five, a snowstorm hit our town. My dad took me with a toy shovel, and we shoveled an elderly neighbor's driveway. I'm sure I wasn't much help shoveling snow, but he included me when giving credit for the job. While we were shoveling, he explained the importance of doing good deeds and helping our neighbors. I didn't understand the importance of it at the time. Now though, I realize he was teaching me about the responsibilities of citizenship, about showing up for the people around us.

Self-government is more than the idea that we elect our own political leaders or have a voice on what policies our government pursues. Self-government begins with the self: how we govern ourselves in public life. It can be easy to discount the impact of good citizenship in times of national division. Going online, we can see a lot of ugly behavior toward each other. It's easy to give in to our baser instincts when watching our elected leaders behave badly. But how we treat each other shapes the society we live in. Being American isn't something you are. It's something you do.

My dad intuitively understood this. He didn't give long lectures on politics or civic duty. He preferred to lead through his actions and trust that I would follow in his footsteps. These weren't grand gestures. They were the quiet, persistent actions of someone who understood that democracy requires maintenance.

Despite our era's cynicism, I think that Americans still, by and large, live by these ideals. The bus route to my son's daycare passes by the neighborhood high school. I live in Chicago, where kids take the city buses to school, not school buses. It is quite crowded in the morning, but the students have always made room for the stroller in the priority seats. Some even help me get the stroller onto the bus. I don't know if the teenagers connect their small act of kindness with the fabric of society: I have never spoken to them beyond "thank you." My dad would recognize what they were doing, however: practicing citizenship.

I believe in America because it believes in us, that we can come together to build a society despite our differences and disagreements. When we say, "*All men are created equal*," we are radically affirming that we are all responsible for governing our country, not a select few officeholders. It is true that America has not always lived up to the ideals it aspires to. However, the strength of our democracy lies not in perfection, but in participation.

In his time in the Air Force, my dad impressed his superiors by quietly accomplishing the mission, whether that be managing contracts for the Department of Defense or refueling other planes in his tanker. My dad said that being a general was not for him — it didn't suit his personality. He was too introverted for the politics that came with the stars. But he made sure that the job was done right, regardless of obstacles or difficult personalities.

As a service member, my dad pledged his loyalty to the Constitution. While that means obeying the lawful orders of superior officers and the president, he did not swear an oath of fealty to the President. He swore an oath to our society.

Us civilians can learn from the military's example. When we lose an election, we accept gracefully that the will of the people was done. When the democratic process makes a decision we disagree with, we still execute it to the best of our ability. Democracy is not a single moment of victory or defeat, but an ongoing conversation among citizens about the kind of society we want to build together. Just as military officers serve presidents of both parties with equal professionalism, we as citizens owe our loyalty not to any particular outcome or leader, but to the democratic process itself.

As Americans, we are only stewards of a system that has been passed from generation to generation. My dad has a keen interest in genealogy and family history. There is nothing he loves more than discovering a previously undiscovered census record that mentions a great-great-grandparent. He traces our family line back to ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War. Others were teachers and farmers, weaving a small part of our national tapestry. Each generation faced its own challenges, made its own mistakes, and yet managed to preserve and strengthen the democracy they inherited.

In another house we lived in, the basement flooded constantly. When my dad talked to our neighbors, he found that everyone on our street had the same problem. The neighbors and my dad dug a series of channels to direct the water to a flood retention area. My dad could have done the minimum to protect our house from flooding; we would only live there a short time, and soon it would be someone else's problem. Instead, he planted a tree in whose shade he would never sit.

Two decades after we moved out, I visited the house again. It had changed hands a few times by then, and I met the latest owner when I asked if I could take a picture. He asked about the work my dad had done and mentioned that he and his neighbors continue to maintain it.

America is not a finished work. Just as my dad's flood channels require maintenance to keep from eroding, we must constantly work to shore up the walls of our democracy. And when we solve the problems of today, we must consider the needs of future generations. A drainage ditch may seem like a small thing, but the same principles of self-government apply everywhere, from homeownership to the halls of Congress.

My dad is still devoted to public service. After retiring from the Air Force, he became a substitute teacher in his local high school, though “substitute” is a poor description of someone who teaches six classes for months at a time. He is essentially a full-time volunteer teacher, teaching math and science to the next generation. It’s hard work: he has to learn the material himself, come up with lesson plans, and grade papers. There’s barely enough time at the end of the day to prepare for the next.

What strikes me most about my father's approach to citizenship is its ordinariness. He’s not trying to change the world. He shoveled snow, dug drainage ditches, and taught calculus to teenagers. These acts seem small when measured against the grand sweep of history. But democracy doesn't survive on grand gestures alone. It survives on the accumulated weight of the small decisions ordinary citizens make every day.

As I write this, my infant son sleeps in the next room. His quiet breathing is a reminder that America does not end with us. I cannot predict the future America he will live in or the problems it will face. But I do know the habits and values my dad practiced will sustain it. I probably will not hand him the constitution the first time he doesn’t want to go to school; I will look for my own moments to model good citizenship to him. One day, he will pass on my dad’s inheritance to his own children, and “*government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth*.”

AFTERWORD

By Colin Mortimer

When Corrine and I asked CNL's members to submit essays about what it means to be American, we weren't sure what we'd get back. The responses — far greater in number than we anticipated — caught us off guard. We were struck that CNL's members, who spend most of their time in our community debating housing policy, trade agreements, and regulatory reform, had been sitting on deeply rooted emotions about the country that went far beyond current events or their partisan leanings.

Patriotism has rarely been considered cool among those of us with left-of-center politics — at best, it's treated as something to approach with layers of irony and qualification. Every four years, Democrats deliver tear-jerking paeans to America at their presidential convention, only to set them aside until the next election cycle. The flag-waving protestors at No Kings rallies have been mocked as cringe, but our members refused to play along with that cynicism. They wrote about what holds the country together. They expressed love for this place without having to immediately litigate every failure in its history. And when they wanted to reckon with those failures, did they did so without rejecting the project as a whole.

Democrats have walked away from patriotic language for a variety of reasons, from discomfort with our history to a fundamental that national pride is inherently exclusionary. Either way, the result has been the same: Democrats let our opponents brand us as unpatriotic and build a monopoly on defining what love of country sounds like, and those definitions have often been narrower and more nativist than the country warrants. Our ceding of that ground has been a mistake. A political movement that can't explain why it cares about the nation will have a hard time earning the trust to lead it.

What these essays show is that the appetite for patriotism was suppressed but not extinguished. Given a platform to express pride in the country, our members seized it. CNL has many roles to play in the national conversation and the fight for the soul of the Democratic Party, and we hope that carrying the torch of patriotism proudly can be one of them.

We want every CNL chapter to use these essays as a starting point for conversation. Share them. Disagree with them. Talk about where the authors got it right and where they missed something. Write your own, if you haven't already. The questions running through these pieces — what we owe each other, what keeps a country this diverse from flying apart, what it looks like to actually practice citizenship — don't have the same answers for everyone. They're the kind of questions that spark the healthy debates that reveal the core values Americans hold truly dear.

If this short collection works the way we hope it will, the conversation starts here and keeps going long after. That is what CNL exists to do.

Colin Mortimer is the founder and director of the Center for New Liberalism, a global network of young, center-left advocates working to advance pragmatic, pro-growth policy ideas across the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond.

ppi

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

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