



PATRICK BUTLER'S KEYNOTE

Delivered at PAR's 2023 Annual Conference and Luncheon on April 26, 2023.

Governor Edwards, distinguished guests, and members of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana:

Let me begin by thanking my friend Beth Courtney, the long-time leader of Louisiana Public Broadcasting, for inviting me to join you today.

I'm sorry she couldn't be with us, but I'm glad to see her successor C. C. Copeland and his colleagues Matt, Kim and Linda here at Table 37.

And while I'm in Baton Rouge, let me join in the chorus of congratulations to Coach Kim Mulkey and her LSU Tigers on their sensational national championship.

I was privileged to know Pat Summitt, the legendary coach of the Tennessee Lady Vols, and Coach Mulkey has created a legend of her own right here in Louisiana.

We Americans love to celebrate success, and these two women have given us a lot to celebrate for a long time.

I've come to Baton Rouge today to explore with you the question of whether America itself can succeed in the 21st century and beyond with a system of government built in — and for — the 18th century.

Our democracy was founded in 1787 under a Constitution of 4,440 words, devised by 55 white men – all of them landowners, many of them slave-holders – representing fewer than four million people in 13 British colonies hugging the eastern seaboard of North America.



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That same Constitution, amended only twenty-seven times in 236 years (the first ten, the Bill of Rights, ratified in 1791 alone), now governs the most powerful and polyglot nation on earth, with more than 330 million citizens from 200 national origins in 50 States spanning a vast continent.

How can this be? What is it about that founding charter, and the people who for more than two centuries have agreed to be governed by it, that made the world's oldest democracy also its most successful?

And with all the political and social divisions now sundering our society, how can this antique form of government possibly meet the needs of modern America?

At the end of the Second Constitutional Convention, one delegate said, "I do not expect this Constitution to last more than 20 years." That delegate was George Washington.

Another delegate posited that "Every constitution, and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right." That delegate was Thomas Jefferson.

A third delegate said, "Our new Constitution is now established. Everything seems to promise it will be durable. But, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." That delegate, you may recognize, was Benjamin Franklin.

So the founders themselves would have marveled at the durability of their now-venerable document.

The vote to adopt it was not unanimous. Only 39 of the 55 delegates signed it. Three delegates abstained, and 13 didn't stay in Philadelphia long enough to vote.

Several objected to the absence of a bill of rights in the original supreme law. At least one refused to sign because the Constitution effectively codified slavery.



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And perhaps the most contentious issue of the Second Constitutional Convention – whether to give every State, large or small, equal representation in the United States Senate – is an issue that still resonates in our politics today.

Indeed, national unanimity has been the rarest feature of our national life.

The only two things America's founders ever agreed to unanimously were the Declaration of Independence – after a long and bitter debate, and with New York abstaining – and the election of George Washington as President of the United States.

The very purpose of the Constitution they wrote was to form a political and legal structure through which our differences could be resolved, fairly and peacefully.

They established a system of checks and balances that would keep any national government or branch of that government from exercising too much control,

And they enshrined “we the people” as the sovereign power of the nation.

However transitory the founders considered their handiwork, these revolutionary principles have sustained our form of government for more than two centuries –

perhaps because they are principles rather than prescriptions for every exigency in our national life.

France, our first ally, has gone through 16 forms of government in the same period.

And these have been centuries of extraordinary stress and peril, including a four-year civil war that very nearly destroyed our union.



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Yet the Constitution endures, and succeeding generations of Americans have invested increasing authority in its almost sacred status as, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "the only safeguard of our liberties."

The very oath of office which every President takes involves a solemn promise to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Those principles, that permanence, that stability, that reverence have been the bulwarks of our Republic — and the foundations of our leadership in the world — even when our political differences have been most dramatic and dangerous.

Those times have been more frequent in our history than we may suppose.

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, passed the House with only two votes to spare in 1865, just weeks before the end of the Civil War.

In September 1940 – months after Hitler had invaded Poland and conquered France, and while Britain stood alone on the precipice of defeat — the legislation creating a military draft in the United States passed the House by a vote of 203-202.

And even in the lifetime of many in this room, in the 1960s and 70s, our country was almost ripped apart by an unpopular war, riots in dozens of our major cities, the assassination of three national leaders, a monumental political scandal, and the most severe economic crisis since the Depression – all in rapid succession – and many Americans feared the center would not hold.

After all of this, we found ourselves with an unelected President, Gerald Ford, the first to be elevated to the presidency under the 25th Amendment to the Constitution.



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His task, no easy one, was to find some cause for optimism, some source of unity, some way to heal our country and help us move beyond those national tragedies that had sapped our confidence in ourselves and our future.

He turned, in his very first speech, to the Constitution:

“My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over,” he said. “Our Constitution works. Our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule.”

With this matter-of-fact reassurance from an ordinary man in an extraordinary situation, America was able to celebrate its 200th anniversary with pride, enthusiasm and renewed faith in ourselves and our country.

It was my honor to help President Ford prepare some of those Bicentennial speeches in 1976.

Now, as we approach our 250th birthday (and I can't tell you how old this makes me feel), we face another crisis of the American spirit.

And on some days, constitutional government itself seems to hang in the balance.

Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, people on the coasts and people in middle America, people on different sides of a host of cultural divides — we all seem to be at each other's throats all the time now.

It is true that our country and our Congress have become much more polarized over the last 30 years.



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The Pew Research Center, of which I am a proud co-founder, has charted a growing gulf among our people — not only on specific issues but also on perceptions of the open-mindedness, the intelligence, the honesty, the morality, the patriotism of those with whom we disagree.

Pew finds that large majorities of Democrats and Republicans form their political allegiances not simply in support of their parties' policies but in vigorous opposition to the other party's policies and people.

This popular polarization is mirrored, perhaps inevitably, in the makeup of the modern Congress. According to the Cook Political Report, the "bible" of political statistics, out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, only 82 are consistently competitive now, meaning that the winner wins by 5 percent or less.

189 seats are considered "safe" Republican seats, 164 "safe" Democratic seats, and the outcome in those districts is almost always determined in the party primaries rather than the general election.

Those primaries tend to favor the most conservative candidate among Republicans and the most liberal candidate among Democrats, and the prospects for our Members of Congress meeting somewhere in the middle seem to diminish with every election.

Gerrymandering — the age-old custom of drawing congressional districts to favor one party or the other — is responsible for some of this polarization.

But according to Cook, this political gamesmanship accounts for only about 42 percent of the districts that fall outside the 5 percent competitive margin of victory.



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The greater driver of our polarization is the deepening partisanship in districts whose borders remain relatively stable.

Fully 252 of the 435 districts are now deep red or deep blue not because of reapportionment but because more and more people are consciously locating in political communities they find congenial.

And the effect is dramatic: there are now exactly half as many competitive congressional districts as there were 25 years ago.

With a Congress thus constituted, it's little wonder that consensus on national policy seems so hard to find.

The wonder is that these representatives ever agree on anything at all.

And yet they do.

Ask almost any Congressman or Senator, and they'll tell you that Congress ends up finding a workable compromise on about 80 percent of the issues that come before them — not only on naming post offices but on truly substantive legislation.

An 80 percent success rate would suggest a pretty strong vote of confidence in our constitutional order, at least among our leaders — at least in private — even though we live in a much different country than the one our founders created.

But it's the other 20 percent of the issues that get all the attention and skew our view of the efficacy of our own government.

According to Pew, 58 percent of Americans are not satisfied with the way democracy is working in America today.



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Only 41 percent have a favorable view of the Democratic Party, and only 37 percent have a favorable impression of the Republican Party.

Almost 40 percent of Americans — and nearly half of those under 50 — now say they wish there were more parties to choose from.

And fully 85 percent say our political system either needs major changes or needs to be completely reformed.

Whether we like it or not, the whole fabric of our society is undergoing an extraordinary transformation.

The Wall Street Journal published new research last month that revealed stunning changes in Americans' values compared with just a quarter-century ago.

In 1998, 70 percent of Americans said patriotism is very important to them. Only 38 percent say so now.

In 1998, 62 percent said religion was very important to them. 39 percent feel this way today.

Tolerance for others, deemed very important to 80 percent of us just four years ago, has dropped to 58 percent today.

Some of our fellow citizens believe it's important to defend the traditions and values of an America that won world wars, went to the moon, conquered polio, and created the most broadly successful economy in the history of the world.



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Others are impatient for a future in which a host of individual rights are more secure, the blessings of liberty and justice are more equitably distributed, and attention is paid to an existential environmental threat to our planet.

It never seems to occur to us that these points of view need not be incompatible.

So fervently are these contrasting views held, so suspiciously does each side view the other's motives and methods, a fundamental question must be asked:

Is the revolutionary promise of the 18th century – government by the consent of the governed – to be overwhelmed in the 21st century by profoundly divergent values that make us more like two countries than one?

My public television colleague Judy Woodruff has stepped away from the anchor chair of the PBS NewsHour to explore precisely these questions with the American people themselves.

She's on the road listening to all kinds of people all over the country, trying to determine if there's anything that still unites the United States of America.

My friend Ken Burns, who is working on an 18-hour history of the American Revolution, is fond of quoting the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, who famously said that

in this land of "e pluribus unum" – out of many, one – we're in danger of having too much pluribus and not enough unum for our democracy to succeed.

In a curious way, it should be reassuring to know that our national history is so replete with political, ideological, and social conflict – because despite all these conflicts we're still one nation, and the most successful nation on earth.



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Disagreements are inevitable. The competition of ideas and beliefs is good for our country. The right to petition for a redress of grievances against our government is protected by the Constitution itself.

But if we stop believing in the principles of majority rule, the integrity of elections, the peaceful transfer of power -- if we decide that constitutional order is less important than getting our own way -- then the Constitution itself becomes worthless words on an old piece of parchment.

Former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee, whom I was privileged to advise for more than four decades, delivered a lecture on Senate leadership a quarter-century ago that may help answer the question of whether our Constitutional order can survive and thrive in the tumultuous 21st century.

"Very often in the course of my eighteen years in the Senate," he said, "I found myself engaged in fire-breathing, passionate debate with my fellow Senators over the great issues of the times.

"But no sooner had the final word been spoken and the last vote taken than I would walk to the desk of my most recent antagonist, extend a hand of friendship, and solicit his support on the next issue for the following day.

"This ritual is as natural as breathing here in the Senate, and it is as important as anything that happens in Washington or in the country we serve.

"It signifies that, as Lincoln said, 'we are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies.'

"It is what makes us America and not Bosnia," Senator Baker said. "It is what makes us the most stable government on earth, and not another civil war waiting to happen.



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“And if we cannot be civil to one another, and if we stop dealing with those with whom we disagree, or those we don’t like, we would soon stop functioning altogether.”

This is the true voice of democracy, heard all too rarely in modern America but still summoning “the better angels of our nature” to redeem the promise of responsible, civil, stable self-government as conceived by our founders and defended by ten generations of Americans.

Will ours be the generation that breaks this promise? If so, it won't be the Constitution's fault.

It's not a perfect system. As Winston Churchill said, “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others.”

But it's been a remarkably hardy system, relying in its revolutionary way on the free will of free men and women to govern themselves.

Ultimately, our system must also rely on good will.

If we want self-government, we have to govern ourselves, not only at the polling place but in our personal conduct toward one another.

And if we want an America that works, we have to make it work ourselves, both by doing our civic duty on Election Day and by contributing in our individual ways to the progress, the prosperity and the peace of our country.



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We have to vote. We have to count every eligible vote and not one more. We have to abide by free and fair elections.

After the election of 1800, the first in which political parties competed in America, John Adams obeyed the Constitution and conceded peacefully to Thomas Jefferson following a vicious campaign and an election so close it took 36 votes of the House of Representatives to resolve.

This was the first time in human history that a national leader surrendered power voluntarily following a popular election, and it was rightly called the second American revolution.

As Jefferson himself would write: "We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun, for this whole chapter in the history of man is new.

"The momentous crisis which lately arose really bespeaks a strength of character in our nation which augurs well for the duration of our republic."

And it's not just politics. We need strength of character in every walk of American life.

I like Coach Mulkey's America, where, after fighting hard against a ferocious competitor to win the national championship, she congratulates Iowa's Caitlin Clark for being "a generational player," shakes her hand, and shows the grace of a good winner.

Fight hard, play by the rules, shake hands, accept the result.

That's strength of character. That, and a little tolerance for differing points of view, are what's required to make democracy work.

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and



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secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

There's only so much this Constitution – or any constitution – can do to govern a free people.

The rest – union, justice, tranquility, liberty -- is up to us. It's always been up to us.

You are doing your part today, strengthening our democratic republic, and providing a forum for civil debate and a basis for sound decisions by the people of Louisiana as they prepare for this year's elections.

If America follows your good example, and keeps faith with its founders, our Constitution and our government can and will succeed in the 21st century and beyond.

For as Mr. Churchill may have said and surely believed: “Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing, after exhausting all the alternatives.”

Thank you, and keep up the good work.

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