

20-20 Vision - Old Thoughts for the Year 2020

By Dennis Payton Knight

Through its two-and-a-half centuries, remarkable people have risen to the presidency of the United States of America. The finest of these have consistently led with a clear moral vision about what America is, what it can be, and what it should be.

George Washington, the first President, encouraged the country that “Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.” He cautioned the people to “Guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism” and to “Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all.”

John Adams spoke of leadership. “Because power corrupts, society's demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases.”

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the famous words, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” after his presidency wrote, “Some are whigs, liberals, democrats, call them what you please. Others are Tories, serviles, aristocrats, &c. The latter fear the people, and wish to transfer all power to the higher classes of society; the former consider the people as the safest depository of power in the last resort.”

John Quincy Adams, cautioned, “Always vote for a principle, though you vote alone, and you may cherish the sweet reflection that your vote is never lost. America, in the assembly of nations, has uniformly spoken among them the language of equal liberty, equal justice, and equal rights.”

Abraham Lincoln, who led the nation through its deepest crisis, also understood the nature of leadership and those who would be leaders, observing, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” Lincoln had a long vision of America: “It is not merely for to-day, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives.”

Theodore Roosevelt, he of the bully pulpit, recognized humbly, “To announce that there must be no criticism of the president... is morally treasonable to the American public.”

Franklin Roosevelt said, “We look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way. The third is freedom from want. The fourth is freedom from fear.”

Dwight Eisenhower saw dangers in partisanship, “If a political party does not have its foundation in the determination to advance a cause that is right and that is moral, then it is not a political party; it is merely a conspiracy to seize power.”

Each of these ten leaders rose through a democratic process of partisanship and politics, but their vision of America, regardless of century or decade, was consistently through a clear lens of justice, progress, and opportunity. Will America again pick a President with 20-20 vision for the year 2020? The time is nigh.