

## INTRODUCTION: WHY WE WRITE

Progressives have a long and storied history in the United States. It is a narrative driven by the liberal principles of freedom, equality, human dignity, tolerance, and the celebration of diversity, and by the conviction that our common wealth should be used for the common good. Our nation's greatest moments occurred when these principles prevailed. We write so that they may endure.

These principles belong to no person, place, or party. They belong to no race, class, or gender. They belong to no time, region, or country of origin. And they recognize no red state/blue state dichotomy. We write to remind ourselves of the progressive principles that have always lifted our nation to higher moral ground. And we reflect on our past in the hope that we can leave our children with a better future.

Our greatest patriots have been those who articulated and acted on these principles. They gave life to our Constitution through their courage and their convictions. Their legacy is our proudest common heritage. It humbles us. We write so we, too, may act on our deepest convictions.

The central protagonists in this story have been citizens. First and foremost, the revolutionaries, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who fought for the expansion of freedoms by

inciting a revolt and throwing off the yoke of British despotism. In their footsteps came the abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, who insisted that no democracy could respectfully call itself one so long as slavery—the nation’s “original sin”—endured. Following them were the suffragists, like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who expanded our understanding of equality and won for women the right to vote.

There are others. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks marched for tolerance and inspired the nation to celebrate diversity. Mother Jones, Cesar Chavez, and Sojourner Truth—while living in different times—championed the inalienable dignity of all human beings. John Muir and Rachel Carson gave voice to the natural world and to our commons. In the name of peace and a check on overreaching executive power, Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers and hastened an end to the Vietnam War.

Great politicians deserve our praise for showing their vision and their courage in the face of adversity. Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves and saved our union. Theodore Roosevelt established a role for government to curb the unbridled excesses of the market and protect our natural wonders. Franklin Delano Roosevelt went a step further and permanently established government’s central role in using the common wealth for the common good by launching the New Deal. It was more than a set of programs—it was a movement imbued with the core progressive values of empathy and responsibility, with the idea that government should not only care about people but also act on that caring.

The beliefs, the convictions, the *values* that inspired these patriots can inspire us today. While the issues and challenges we face are different, the guiding principles remain.

If America were as these patriots envisioned it, there would be no reason for *Thinking Points*. Unfortunately, the nation has strayed far from its progressive values. Children remain impover-

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ished, without adequate food and health care, offending our commitment to basic human dignity. State-sanctioned discrimination against homosexuality pervades, mocking our commitment to diversity, tolerance, and equality before the law. Wide disparities persist between ethnic communities—in health, education, incarceration rates, and economic power—leaving the promise of the civil rights movement unfulfilled. A global climate crisis looms, the challenge to solve it still unmet. And we are stuck in a military quagmire in Iraq that has sapped our nation not only of its strength and its wealth but of its very moral fiber.

Above all, a dark cloud of authoritarianism looms over the nation, making it difficult to address any of these issues without major political change. Radical conservatives have taken over the reins of government and have been controlling the terms of political debate for many years. For real change to happen, progressive ideals must return to center stage in our national political discourse. This will be neither easy nor quick—it will take years of work. But we can prevail.

It is up to us—citizens—to articulate the progressive vision. Progressive political leaders cannot do it alone. For all of their intelligence and good intentions, they are subject to overwhelming short-term pressures. They will need the help of progressives throughout America. We must trumpet our values throughout the nation so that progressive political leaders will have the backing they need to speak out far more freely.

Fortunately, today, in the service of these ideals, we do not face a British army, as the revolutionaries did. We do not face lynch mobs, as the abolitionists and civil rights workers did. We do not face a Pinkerton army, as striking workers once did. We face ourselves. We must muster the political courage to voice—and to stand for—what we most deeply believe. This is why we write. We hope you will use *Thinking Points* to help return our country to its progressive ideals.