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November 5, 2016

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OPINION

Before Election Day, some reminders of America's greatness: Alan Garfield

By **PennLive Op-Ed**

on November 05, 2016 at 11:00 AM, updated November 06, 2016 at 7:26 AM

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By Alan Garfield

America has had plenty of rough-and-tumble presidential campaigns.

But Donald Trump has brought campaigning to new lows of tawdriness, mean-spiritedness, and reckless incitement of violence.

He has denigrated people with disabilities, Mexicans, Muslims, and women.

Trump has even refused to say that he will accept the results of the election if he loses.

But don't let Trump's depravity make you lose sight of our nation's fundamental decency.

Here are a few reminders to nourish your soul and restore your pride in a nation that Puritan John Winthrop, and later Presidents John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, called a shining "city upon a hill."

When President George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which protects people with disabilities from unjustified discrimination, he said that our nation's "problems are large, but our unified heart is larger."

He described America as "the most generous, optimistic nation on the face of the Earth" and said Americans will "not rest until every man and woman with a dream has the means to achieve it."



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Ruth Bader Ginsburg struck a similar note when she wrote the Supreme Court decision granting women the right to attend the Virginia Military Institute.

Ginsburg, who as a lawyer for the ACLU's Women's Right Project in the 1970s won a string of early Supreme Court victories establishing women's right to equal treatment, readily acknowledged that the physical differences between men and woman are "enduring" and called them a "cause for celebration."

But they are not to be used, she said, for "denigration . . . of either sex or for artificial constraints on an individual's opportunity."

As a U.S. Senator from Delaware, Joseph Biden introduced the Violence Against Women Act to Congress. Now, as Vice President, Biden has continued his campaign against the abuse of women.

Earlier this year, he reminded world business leaders that women's economic progress is meaningless without protection from violence:

"None of this matters if a woman is not safe," he said, "safe in her workplace, safe in her home, safe on the street. It's a basic human right – the right to be safe."



Trump, Clinton vow to take on ISIS, but only one reveals a plan

Every American child learns Emma Lazarus' revered poem, The New Colossus, which Lazarus wrote to raise money for the pedestal that holds the Statue of Liberty.

In the poem, that "mighty woman with a torch" tells the Old World, "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"

But for America, she says, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be breathe free."

How many among us (excepting Native Americans and those whose ancestors were brought here as slaves) do not have family members who fit that description and were eternally grateful that this nation allowed them to settle here?

When President George Washington sought to reassure members of Newport, Rhode Island's Jewish community that our great nation tolerates people of every faith, he referred to the Old Testament verse: "Everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

As Washington explained, the government of the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Given Trump's unwillingness to commit to accepting the election's outcome, many Americans might be thinking of another Washington quote that has been widely attributed to the first president (but never actually verified).

Washington is said to have openly pondered, "What is most important of this grand experiment, the United States?"



Clintons, Obamas to campaign together in Philadelphia night before election

He then answers his own question:

"Not the election of the first president but the election of its second president. The peaceful transition of power is what will separate this country from every other country in the world."

Even though Washington may never have said this, the statement has endured in the minds of Americans, probably because it captures our gratitude for living in a country that has enjoyed the peaceful transition of power for over two centuries.

May we continue to be so blessed.

Alan Garfield is a professor at Widener University Delaware Law School.

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