

# **Civility, a Most Essential Tool for Building the Great Experiment**

*By Akram R. Elias*

*Former Grand Master*

*Grand Lodge of Free And Accepted Masons of Washington, DC*

Good morning! I am deeply honored to stand before you to speak on a subject that is truly very dear to my heart: America, the Great Experiment. What is the Great Experiment? What makes it unique in terms of Governance? Why are citizen activism *and* citizen engagement so critical to the Experiment's continuous success? How do we bring activism and engagement into a state of harmony? What is that trowel that can help us spread the cement of harmony? Why has civility become the evermore needed trowel?

To help us answer these questions, I will use excerpts from my book still in draft form titled *American by Choice*.

Since America is a nation of immigrants, there are countless immigrant stories. Like most of my fellow immigrant Americans, I assert my adopted national identity proudly, never leaving my home in the morning without a flag pin in my lapel and ready to seize any opportunity to explain to anyone willing to listen what makes America great. I am moved to tell my story as a way of ex-pressing that pride and my profound gratitude for the opportunities that my adopted homeland has given me. However, I wish to do more than simply re-count a personal tale by drawing on my experience to reflect on the special significance of fundamental American values that I discovered and embraced when I became an American. My hope in doing so is that my experience can serve to reaffirm what makes America exceptional, a nation able to help advance the human condition everywhere. I believe that such a reaffirmation now is especially important in light of the

current level of dysfunction in government, reflected in the strident character of electoral politics and the increasing anger of disaffected voters in search of answers to the daunting challenges facing America.

In recent years, we have experienced unprecedented levels of vitriol in political discourse at the national level. Gridlock and dysfunction largely define the state of politics and governance in the federal government, and political tribalism reflects deep political, economic, and cultural divisions among Americans. A kind of fearful uncertainty seems to have taken hold of many Americans. However, I am an optimist and I do not think my optimism is unfounded. There have been periods of severe disruption in our nation's history, and we have always emerged better and stronger. But we have more than reassurance from the past. Disruption can be useful in forcing us to confront problems that we have ignored and can open the way for new voices to be heard. That is what is happening now. As a source of inspiration and insight, the Great Experiment, as it was articulated and given life at the beginning of our nation, remains as relevant and important as ever.

American exceptionalism is all too often bombastically expressed as superiority to other nations, rather than as the product of the Great Experiment designed by the Republic's founders to give fullest expression to individual freedom and creativity, and the ability of the people to govern themselves by themselves under a rule of law that has their consent.

The great American experiment is an extraordinary construct designed on, shaped by, and still revolves around the power of ideas. For example, identity in almost every country on the face of the earth has been developed based on common cultural traditions, shared religious values, and/or tribal/blood connections. In America, citizenship is not based on any of these; it is defined by three fundamental documents, the

Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights – three constructs shaped by ideas under a rule of law.

Consequently, the government in the United States was never conceived nor designed to be an entity that solves people's problems. Instead, government is a *systems engineering machine* for people to use to solve their own problems. The separation of powers, non-centralization, checks and balances, private-public partnerships are the main axes providing resiliency to the machine. Each and every generation of Americans would calibrate or recalibrate, add parts or retool them, as they use this complex machine to solve their problems of the day.

This unique construct in governance requires fundamentally three factors:

1. **Citizen activism:** I don't ask what the government is doing to solve a problem in our society, but rather what can I do to fix the problem? The Great Experiment requires first and foremost that citizens take on individual responsibility, stand up for what is *right*, and actively advocate for bettering their life conditions. But as citizens become activists, they will undoubtedly find one another on opposite sides of the spectrum on practically all policy issues. If we are left with activism alone, however, stagnant and stubborn polarization can easily reign, and the systems engineering machine stalls.
2. **Civic engagement:** engaging one another – not talking at one another – through rigorous debates and intense conversations about policy matters is essential to help us find strong common ground on which we construct civil society-based solutions. Coming together as communities is necessary to our form of governance. To achieve that sense of *E Pluribus Unum – Out of Many, One* – or *Diversity within Unity*, we must *level* with one another, listen to one another, and be guided by a spirit of *equity and justice*. Only

then, we can strike the right balance though compromise and build strong and effective strategies for governance. But how can citizens on opposite sides of issues engage one another for the purpose of finding that *common and strong* ground if they were to demean, dehumanize, and demonize one another?

3. **Civility:** without civility in our discourse, actions, and behaviors, we cannot succeed in bringing activism and engagement into balance. Civility helps us discover the *beauty* of our humanity through its diversity. It is effectively, the tool with which we can spread the cement of harmony that binds us together as one diverse people.

I discovered civility as the “trowel” to spread the cement of harmony from the practical applications of the teachings of Freemasonry. Freemasonry has been profoundly important to me personally, enriching my life with the values it embodies and enlarging my understanding and appreciation of principles that guided my adopted country in its tumultuous birth. These values and principles have never been more needed for the support and guidance of the country than today. While I am a proud and committed Mason, I will resist any temptation to proselytize. I am, however, convinced that a brief examination by you of the tenets of Freemasonry – Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth – and the actions that are based upon them, is very useful for the insights offered on the birth and development of the nation’s republican principles and values and how they can be more effectively realized.

There is another *uniquely* American reason for the urgency of civility in the United States. The Founders of the Great Experiment considered five natural rights and incorporated them into Article I of the Bill of Rights – the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. To the Founders, natural rights were *innate* and given by the ‘creative force’ - not awarded by government, nor the people. The First Amendment does

not state ‘that citizens have the right to freedom of speech’ but rather states “***Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech.***” This is why in America, we cannot pass laws banning hate speech as do other countries.

Given the nature, breadth, and depth of diversity in our country – religion, race, nationality, opinion, culture, and gender – we must counter hate speech effectively through community-based strategies that include interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural commutation, respect for diversity, etc. The objectives of such strategies are focused on breaking down the walls of prejudice and fear that divide communities by building bridges of understanding through knowledge and empathy, and connecting diverse communities to build common solutions to common problems guided by the spirit of *togetherness*. Without civility in discourse, actions and behaviors, the task becomes insurmountable.

To effectively counter Americans’ fears and frustrations, domestic and foreign, we need to do two things: rediscover and celebrate a free people’s creativity and enterprise, which are evident throughout America despite the failings of government, and, through the civic engagement of motivated citizens, make government an effective instrument for encouraging and supporting that creativity and enterprise.

This will be accomplished largely through civility by establishing balance and equilibrium in society and leaving space in which initiatives outside of government can be born and encouraged to flourish. The Great Experiment, a work-in-progress reflecting the farseeing genius of the Founders has brought us reasonably intact through almost two and a half centuries of an often tumultuous, at one point sanguinary, contest over the scope and nature of governmental authority. I also believe that it gives America a unique advantage among other nations in coping with the daunting challenges that lie ahead. Inherent in the structure and dynamics of the Great Experiment are a flexibility and resiliency that

equip America to contend more successfully than any other country with the forces unleashed by globalization and the knowledge revolution.

In closing, just as the young George Washington, a wealthy Virginia planter, became a committed Mason out of a sense of civic responsibility, so we should acknowledge an obligation to give back to our communities, both those that are near and those that are distant. The Great Experiment points with optimism to the future, extending the boundaries of freedom and tolerance as it meets new challenges. Underlying everything is the central and most fundamental principle of Freemasonry, achieving *equilibrium* in the lodge, the nation, and the wider world, an equilibrium that is achieved when the dynamic elements that constitute each entity are in harmonious balance using the trowel of civility.

Thank you!