The Third Founding Declaration

Prologue

In the annals of history, modern democracy stands out as one of humanity's greatest achievements. From its beginnings, democracy was an exercise in hope—hope that the world and the lot of ordinary people could be made better. This was especially true in America, a nation predicated not on established traditions, inherited identities, or longstanding territorial boundaries, but solely on the ideal of expanding freedom, equality, justice, and toleration. The hope of America was for a home and a shared endeavor where Americans of all backgrounds could flourish. Both flawed and incomplete in its implementation, democracy in America—civic, pluralist, and liberal—has nevertheless stumbled forward in its history toward the realization of that ideal.

Today, however, American democracy faces its greatest crisis since the American Civil War. The signs are everywhere: extreme partisanship making political compromise impossible, increasing threats and acts of political violence, a loss of trust in all branches of government and all major institutions of civil society, and a growing disregard for the rule of law by a leadership class often defined by corruption and cowardice. These are some of the forces today that undermine the rich legacies of freedom for which Americans have sacrificed, fought and died, forces that would ultimately pull the nation into tyranny.

Too many Americans today believe that the cause of this crisis lies in the malice of the "other side." While active political harms are inflicted by actors across the political spectrum, the sources of our crisis trace to sources of disaffection and disempowerment that are far deeper in American history and culture. These sources have weakened the ethical ideals, moral dispositions, and social habits that constitute America's true constitution—not the constitution written on parchment or graven on tablets of marble or brass, but one etched within the deepest aspirations of its citizens.

The Call for a Third Founding

The Third Founding Declaration is a response to this crisis. It is a call to action, no more audacious than is required by the gravity of this moment: that America cannot survive without a revival of our constitution in the fullest sense, a rededication to a common civic, pluralist, and liberal democratic project and the renewal of the ideals that animate that project.

The United States has already experienced two great foundings. The first was the American Revolution of 1776 and the ratification of the Constitution of 1789 that together transformed thirteen British colonies

© Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—2026

into a free and independent nation. Through it, the Founders launched the American experiment, for the first time creating a nation that would find its governing authority in the people.

The second founding began in the wake of the American Civil War, when Union victory meant that the liberal-egalitarian creed would be the country's fundamental organizing idea going forward, the basis for state legitimacy, and the supreme political and cultural value binding the nation together.

The first and second foundings came about when it became clear that the old symbolic and cultural orders could no longer hold up in the face of profound cultural, moral, economic, and technological changes. Both were ultimately precipitated by bloody and destructive wars.

We believe that changes of a similar order are occurring around us today, and we fear that these changes will give rise to a third violent founding struggle. Already we have experienced five decades of bitter culture war, growing harsher and more violent over time, with both sides drawn to extremism and intolerance.

The call for a Third Founding, then, is a constructive endeavor, focused on the hard work that lies ahead for all Americans within their civic institutions to deliberate, honestly and generously, the meaning of freedom, justice, equality, and toleration, particularly in relation to the thorniest issues that divide our nation. It is also a non-partisan endeavor that takes no side other than the side of those citizens — conservative, moderate, and progressive — who see themselves as Americans first before they see themselves as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents.

A Call to Defend: Accountability

Though at its heart constructive, the call for a Third Founding is necessarily a call to defend and preserve American democracy against all forms of political violence, against the extremism that will allow neither deliberation nor compromise, against the authoritarian and autocratic forces that would impose their rule repressively, and against the reckless disregard for the rule of law and the independence of not only governmental institutions but the civic institutions that provide the animating dynamism of a vital democratic nation.

A Call to Renew: Four Commitments

The call to a Third Founding is also, necessarily, a call to rebuild a civic culture that will underwrite and sustain democracy through times of extraordinary change. That work will bear fruit if it is rooted in at least four enduring commitments.

© Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—2026

- *A commitment to reconstitute a civic culture centered on an ethics of human dignity and respect.* If we are to achieve the aim of consolidating the moral and political goods of democracy, resisting the nihilism of our political culture, and rebuilding national solidarity around a vision of human flourishing, we must start with a moral imaginary rooted in an ethics of human dignity that is spacious enough but also grounded enough to be credible amid the fragmentation of belief and practice that, in part, has given rise to this crisis. An ethics of human dignity is foundational to any possibility of a renewal of American democracy.
- *Built upon this, a commitment to reaffirm the social practices within civic life befitting democratic citizens.* Restoring the possibility of common action across social and political differences must begin below the level of politics, in the everyday practices that form the groundwork of social and political life. None of these is more important than the practice of civil discourse. Democracy, after all, is an agreement not to do violence to each other over our differences, but to work through them dialogically. But democracy can only make progress in these ways if democratic practice operates within shared norms: *a commitment to truth*, because truth is, among other things, a prerequisite of justice; *a commitment to toleration and civility* because these are prerequisites to peaceful coexistence; and *a commitment to a discourse aimed at and justified by its promotion of common goods rather than factional interests alone.* Without these norms, public and political discourse become tools of manipulation, propaganda and demagoguery.
- *A commitment to the independence and renewal of the institutions of civil society and key agencies of the government.* Among the chief deformations of American democracy today results from the politicization of civil society and its various institutions, among them religion, philanthropy, education, science, journalism, the arts, professional associations, and the like, not to mention key agencies of government. When these institutions become politicized, not only is the public deprived of meaningful access to vital public goods, but citizens become alienated from those institutions. Trust deteriorates; legitimacy erodes. By reorienting themselves around the pursuit of the internal goods that only these institutions can provide, they will lower the temperature of political conflict and restore public trust in the efficacy of these institutions.
- *A commitment to a renewal of democratic agency.* To many, the federal government, as a whole and in its parts, seems distant, opaque, and incomprehensible. The power of government is not exercised *for* people, but *on* people and *through* them by means of regulation, administration, education and surveillance. A robust, functional democracy, however, embodies a humane faith in the dignifying capacity of ordinary people to deliberate over their own good, as both private individuals and members of a citizen public. The decline of that faith has been responsible for much of the discontent and the sense of powerlessness that trouble our country today. A reassertion of proper democratic limits and

© Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—2026

control over the machinery of government, coupled with the growth of a humane civic ethos that transcends the culture war, would help to restore Americans' sense of peoplehood.

We are convinced that these ethical commitments accord with the highest ideals of American character and even today can be found in people of all convictions and persuasions.

The Call for Leadership

Toward the end of defending democracy and rebuilding the nation, it is not to politicians or parties that we look, but rather to the culture-producing institutions of civil society. It is these institutions that bear the burden of leadership. These institutions—local, regional and national—must hold the line against any and all authoritarian tendencies in the government that would subvert the rule of law, undermine the independence of civic institutions, weaken the balance of power in government, justify or promote political violence, and denigrate fellow citizens. They must also bear the long-term burden of modeling and promoting the civic, pluralist, and liberal ideals that have long generated cohesion in American life.

A New Era of Nation-Building

America, we must always remember, is not just a plot of land on which we live, but a home that we share. Its founding documents are not relics, but blueprints for an ideal wanting to be realized. Citizenship, therefore, is not just about the rights we possess, but an array of responsibilities we bear to contribute to the task of defending, caretaking, and restoring. This nation, then, is not something we inherit fully formed, but something we build together, repair, and add on to over generations. In this way, America becomes a place of belonging where we not only toil for personal survival, but labor toward collective flourishing. Our task, in the end, is not just to live in America, but to live up to it and to work together toward the realization of its promise.

This has always been America's story, but it is a story that has gradually faded from memory, with the consequence that far too many Americans no longer experience America as a home, but as a strange and inhospitable land.

To rebuild a national home, we must do more than legislate; we must remember, re-narrate, and renew our commitment to this home we call America. Only then can we recognize each other not as isolated individuals, but as co-authors of a common story—a story with a complicated history, to be sure, but a story with chapters yet to write.

© Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—2026

We Americans now stand at a historical crossroads that requires us to make a choice: to accept an encroaching despotic rule from above or to launch an active and constructive re-founding—reclaiming the American democratic ideal adequate to the times in which we live.

That work will be long and difficult, but bracing. The illiberal and anti-democratic actors in our midst may have the loudest voices in politics and social life today, but they are in fact minority voices. The majority of Americans have become weary of their dehumanizing projects. It is time to repudiate those strategies in the name of a fundamental reconstitution, a Third Founding of the ideals and aspirations of American democracy—not, perhaps, as the world-spanning empire that she has sometimes desired to become, but as a decent, flourishing, healthy political order that honors human dignity and human difference and that allows people of all sorts to thrive and prosper, each under his or her own vine and fig tree, with none to make them afraid.

Lead Drafter:
James Davison Hunter
Labrosse-Levinson Professor
of Religion, Culture and Social Theory
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture
University of Virginia

© Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—2026