

Nancy Pelosi: America Is Great When America Is Good

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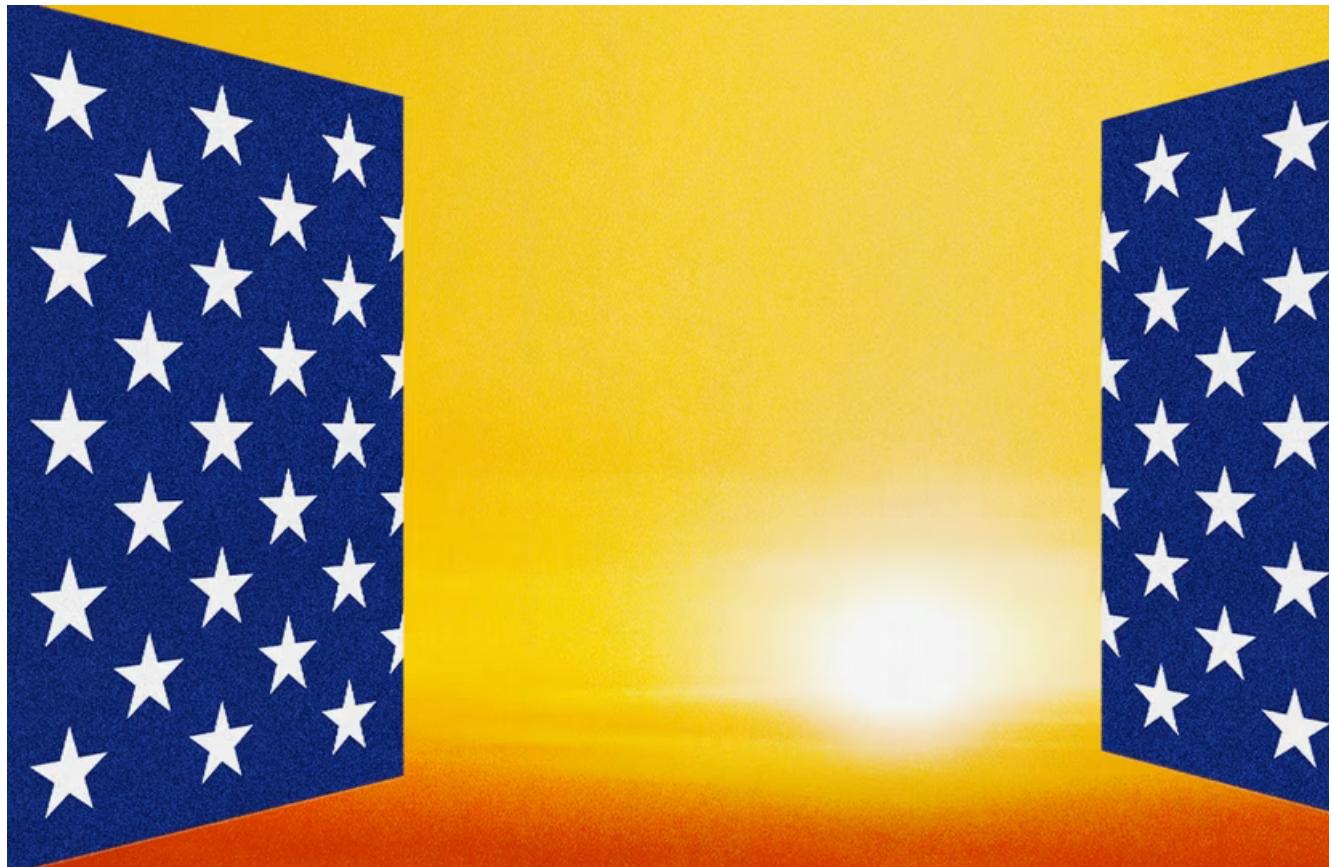


Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

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As America approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, I have returned again and again to the words of Thomas Paine, who advanced the cause of American freedom with a memorable call to action: *The times have found us.*

The times had indeed found Paine, and the rest of our Founders, who summoned the courage to declare independence from a king; to win a war against the strongest empire in the world; and to write our Constitution (thank goodness they made it amendable). In the century that followed, the times found Abraham Lincoln, who saved our union by winning the Civil War. And now the times have found us once again.

In our own lives, and in the life of our nation, great good can come from great trials. But we also know this: Nothing we love ever comes easily. Ours is a nation forged by war and protest, in the loneliness of struggle and the slow work of centuries. We have always sought to perfect our union, even—especially—in the face of forces that seem too strong to ever overcome. This is another moment of extraordinary difficulty. It amazes me that so many people can endure so much suffering of others while doing nothing to address their needs.

It is easy to despair. I know this is the way millions of Americans feel now. Yet the story of this country is the story of patience in tribulation, and hope in the face of fear. What we choose to do in this hour of our history will determine the shape of America and the world for decades.

I am a child of America and a child of great religious faith. Both teach that there is no light without darkness. So what can we do? In the song of Saint Francis, the patron saint of my home city, we ask the Lord to make us an instrument of his peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. The way of Saint Francis, the way of soldiers and suffragists, the way of our beloved John Lewis—that must be our way, too. We the people must follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

That has always been who Americans are. Time and again, we have stepped up for our fellow Americans in times of need; expanded the definition of freedom to include more of us in it; and fended off tyrants seeking to take power away from the people. Once again, we will prove who we are through what we do in this precarious moment. And we can do so through actions both profound and personal. Our democracy depends as much on casting a ballot as lending a hand to a neighbor in need.

Those of us who believe in liberty and dignity, goodness and generosity, must never give in to the forces arrayed against the things we hold dearest. The battle can be exhausting, but it is a battle to which we are called by conscience and by love of country. This is the spirit that has motivated my decades of public service, through moments of great progress, great pain, and even great peril. Through it all, what kept me going were those lessons I learned as a child in Baltimore: to sow love and to help others. Those are unshakable responsibilities that all of us, as Americans, share. And as I soon begin my final year in Congress, I believe as fervently as ever that this must be our path forward.

America has always been a long-standing promise and an ongoing project. Decades of peace and prosperity made it tempting to believe that our democracy was self-sustaining—but in fact, it must be constantly tended to, strengthened, and defended. Democracy has been described as a horizon: unreachable, because inevitably our ambition for more freedom always grows.

So just as patriots launched a revolution against a king, turned the tide at Gettysburg, stormed the beaches of Normandy, and marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we, too, must be patriots for our time. That means not just holding on to the rights and freedoms our fellow Americans have fought for, but refusing to surrender the courageous spirit that inspired them.

Yes, the times have found us once again. But generations past have always prevailed, and so shall we, for our faith in the goodness of America, and our commitment to the freedom we owe to our children, is what will always give us hope.