

2020 resolution for Trump, Democrats and us: Let go of the past, adapt to the future

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I often think of some of the last words spoken by President John F. Kennedy. “We would like to live as we once lived,” he remarked at a breakfast hours before his assassination, “but history will not permit it.”

Nor will history permit us to live today as we once did. Events intrude, as they did for JFK that day. But this hasn’t stopped politicians — on both sides — from trying to turn back the clock. For example, here we are with one-fifth of the 21st century behind us, and Democrats running for president (most of them anyway) talk of labor-intensive manufacturing and unions, while President Donald Trump praises coal and tries to bring back incandescent light bulb technology dating to 1879. Why not bring back the rotary phone and black-and-white TV while we’re at it? Is that the best they can do?

Their nostalgia is understandable. Technology is moving faster than mainstream comprehension; it threatens vast disruption to what we know. This, combined with the very human desire for simple solutions and an avoidance of sacrifice, gives political fuel to those who maintain that answers to the future can be found in the past.

Edison would be first to look forward

But life marches on whether we like it or not, and adaptability, not clinging to yesterday, is required.

For example, Democrats should talk more about how to respond to the principal destroyers of jobs today: robotics and artificial intelligence, which are beginning to chew up even once safe white-collar jobs (to be fair, at least one Democrat, Andrew Yang, is talking about this).

And Trump should acknowledge that bankruptcies in the coal industry have accelerated on his watch while the cost of LED bulbs and renewable energy continues to fall. The future is clear, whether he can admit it or not.

Surely, no one would be more contemptuous of these desires to turn back time than the very inventor of incandescent lighting himself: Thomas Edison. Never one to be nostalgic about the past, the relentless inventor was always, always looking ahead. "There's a way to do it better," the wizard of Menlo Park said. “Find it.”

At the turn of the 21st century, 69% of Americans were satisfied “with the way things are going in the United States.” Today, it’s half that. According to Gallup data, satisfaction began to

rebound during the Obama era and has strengthened during the Trump years, but even so: We have fallen far during this century.

We must indeed do things better, as Edison said, and we must find a way to do them together. If you're trying to get somewhere, it's best to keep your eyes on the road ahead, not the rearview mirror. Accordingly, as we begin a new and perhaps perilous decade, I think we should acknowledge some problems that have become all too apparent and need addressing.

Our personal liberties are being challenged and various studies — from Freedom House, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, to name three — note that numerous other countries are freer than we are. Freedom House says that “in recent years (America’s) democratic institutions have suffered erosion,” while Heritage says that based on a dozen categories, the United States is 76.8% economically free — below 11 other countries.

We can do better.

Our politicians brag about how great things are and how we've never had it better. Yet life expectancy in the United States has fallen three years in a row.

We can do better.

We love to whine about the state of things, but only 61% of eligible voters bothered to cast a ballot in 2016.

We can do better.

We demand good roads and schools, clean water, health care and all the rest but complain that taxes are too high (fact check: not so).

We can do better.

Help make things better in 2020

We have become meaner and less civil. We associate only with our own kind while shunning, belittling, even dehumanizing others who are different. In doing so, we demean our individual character, weaken our communities and tear at our national fabric.

We can do better.

We call ourselves patriots and claim to love the Constitution — though most of us likely can only describe its First or Second Amendments.

We can do better.

We consider ourselves knowledgeable and informed, yet surveys repeatedly show vast ignorance about things that matter. Only about one-third of Americans, for example, can name all three branches of government. Another study found that “more Americans could identify Michael Jackson as the composer of ‘Beat It’ and ‘Billie Jean’ than could identify the Bill of Rights as a body of amendments to the U.S. Constitution.”

And everyone seems to have an opinion on Ukraine. Too bad hardly anyone can find it on a map.

Perhaps we should acknowledge that we're not as smart as we presume, and that this collective ignorance makes it harder to solve problems.

We can do better.

There's more, but you get the point. We're dealing with deep rooted, often intertwined problems. And while electing a president who conveys civility and good old-fashioned American decency can make a huge difference, we can also be part of the change ourselves. To begin, we can acknowledge our own shortcomings, stop blaming others for our problems and simply resolve to do better by others. As Edison said, we must find a way.

We're all in this together. I wish you a wonderful 2020 and beyond.