Reflections on Our Times

The air is full of lamentations and tales of woe. Unemployment, foreclosures, rising health care costs fill the headlines. We even hear that this is the end of the American era. Winston Churchill once said, “American always gets it wrong—until America gets it right.”

Remember, we as a nation could not construct a workable government after defeating the English at Yorktown in 1783. We tried again in 1788 and replaced a weak states-rights structure with a stronger central government. But, we postponed the toughest decision, slavery, for 50 years. By then we had the Missouri Compromise and later the Dred Scott decision that put North and South at each other’s throats by 1861. Lincoln’s magnanimity (“malice toward none, charity for all”) gave way to carpetbagging.

We had a second long period of nation-building that gave way first to trust-busting and then to the Depression. Some say that only the Second World War killed the Depression. Others now identify the Greatest Generation for building the world’s greatest nation.

Am I depressed by ups and downs? Not on your life. Here is why. When deToqueville visited the young United States in the 1830s from the mature society in Europe, he noticed a key trait: the amount of citizen involvement in civic life and the level of volunteer contribution to the very fabric of America. That level continues to this day. We live in the midst of it in Barrington.

Just look at the Barrington Area Public Library list of local organizations and especially the charitable or not-for-profit groups. At last count, more than 140 organizations of which at least 50 were non-profit charities. That is the life of America. That is where I take strength and hope. We are enduring a wrenching period dealing with the aftermath of a financial system that was allowed and even encouraged by government to take on more risk and a housing oversupply resulting from deliberately easy money. What brought New Orleans back? Certainly, government emergency money was needed. But what makes New Orleans sing now is the heartening influx of young people who came in to help and stayed to build.

Whether it will be the young people who look around and realize there is much to build on here, or just a rising sentiment in the entire population that something is wrong here now—and that shouting at each other is simply not the way forward—these processes need to begin here and now.

We can take the very momentum in our own community and transfer it to the nation. We built a magnificent house of care in our new Pepper Family Hospice Home. We built a strong Barrington Area Community Foundation that is already larger than it was before the Great Recession. We are expanding our hospital again. We have built an amazing Wellness Place. And our 75-year-old Wilmering Scout Cabin has been rebuilt by local effort to serve youth for another 75 years. Barrington, just look around. We can do it. We can and do show how. Come on, America. We can and will make this another American Century. Let it start here.

Norval Stephens is one of the founders of the Barrington Area Community Foundation and is on the boards of the Barrington Area Development Council, the Barrington Cultural Commission and the Samaritan Counseling Center.