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Let's Make 2026 About "We the People"

by

Randolph J. May *

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When the bell drops in Times Square ringing in the New Year, there will be no denying that the rifts in America's body politic run deep. Indeed, America at times appears to be coming apart at the seams as the divisions deepen between those on the Left and the Right. The center of the political spectrum shrinks.

With the extremes on both sides becoming more entrenched, if not gaining strength, as 2026 begins it's not beyond the pale to worry America's ultimate fate. And if we worry thus, we should ask ourselves: How might we, as American citizens, revitalize our sense of common purpose (of "the general Welfare" as the Constitution's Preamble puts it) while, at the same time, reconciling the existence of a wide diversity of opinions on matters of public importance?

This year, in which we are celebrating America's 250th birthday, I suggest an excellent place to begin is with a reflection on the Constitution's first three words: "We the People."

For the Constitution's drafters, the phrase "We the People" was not chosen casually. Those three words needed to be more than a memorable opening. They needed to be an expression of the sovereign will of the people. Consistent with Lockean social contract theory familiar to the Constitution's framers, "We the People" was intended to signify, at the Constitution's very beginning, that the powers exercised by America's new government would be derived from "the consent of the people," not from a monarch, or even from the government itself.

In its very first sentence, the Declaration of Independence, issued 11 years before the Constitution was drafted, refers to "one People," not unlike the Constitution's "We the People." And the Declaration goes on to proclaim that governments derive "their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed." This foundational precept at the core of individual liberty and a free society means that the exercise of ordinary politics, not force, threats of violence, or government diktats must be the way in which political differences among are resolved.

After the American Revolution which secured independence through much spilled blood and spent treasure, the embodiment of popular sovereignty in the Constitution was crucial to laying the foundation for the new American democracy. Recall that the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 was attended by only 55 delegates, and not all of them attended at the same time. And only 39 of them signed the Constitution on Sept. 17, a truly small number indeed!

Given the small number of delegates, and the fact that the drafting process was closed to the public, the idea that the Constitution was based on the consent of the people was essential for it to gain legitimacy as a source of authority for what was to become the fundamental law of land. In an important way this legitimacy rested on the requirement that, for the Constitution to take effect, it had to be ratified by at least three-fourths of the states. And, notably, the state ratifications had to occur through conventions in each state comprised of delegates elected by the people themselves. The requirement for this exercise of popular sovereignty was specified in the Constitution itself in Article VII.

While the ratification process was the formal means by which the Constitution's legitimacy was achieved, I submit it would be wrong to underestimate the enduring emotive power of the Constitution's first three words – then and now – to signify what ought to be the unity of purpose of America's citizens in binding themselves together freely "in Order to perform a more perfect Union."

In times like the present, when America's citizenry seems to be bitterly divided, a resolve to engage in deep reflection regarding what it means to be part of "We the People" – as each of us is – would be a worthwhile resolution for the new year. Deep reflection is another worthwhile resolution for the 250th celebration of the American experiment in democracy.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Potomac, MD. The views expressed in this Perspectives do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *For 2026, 'We the People'* was published in *The Washington Times* on January 1, 2026.