

# A STRATEGY FOR AMERICAN RENEWAL

*The late Amb. David Abshire draws from the lessons of history and his own extraordinary life to remind us what truly made America exceptional.*

**BY DAVID M. ABSHIRE**

My life has spanned the Great Depression, World War II, and the rocky aftermath of the Cold War. I saw our nation emerge from the Second World War as the most powerful in the world. I fought in the Korean War. I served in government during the Vietnam War, which divided the nation. I watched as our nation came together in response to the horror of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and then came apart over the war in Iraq. As an “elder statesman,” I offered counsel to our nation’s leaders in the aftermath of both those tumultuous events. The United States of America that today has risen to the heights of global power was forged in fire and hardship, each step in that long ascent a conscious decision to persevere and prevail.

I am a historian at heart and by training. I grew up reading about the heroic statesmanship of leaders like George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, Rutherford Hayes, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt. These men and their stories inspired me to attend and graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point, and to earn a doctorate in history from Georgetown University. They instilled in me a lifelong love of narrative history, and steered me towards a career in public service.

For much of my career I led the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the think tank I co-founded in 1962 with the great strategist Admiral Arleigh Burke. For decades during the Cold War and afterwards, CSIS has brought together individuals from both sides of the political aisle to debate the important issues that bore on national strategy and government reform. The center has always served as a convener, reaching out to the best and the brightest from numerous fields of expertise and bringing them together with officials from the executive and legislative branches.

At the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress (CSPC), where I served as president for the first decade of the 21st century, we continued with that same tradition.

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In a long career leading think tanks and working in both the executive and legislative branches of government, I have wrestled with many of the issues that have come to define America, both our prosperity at home and outsized role in the world. I have had the privilege to work with several of our nation’s great modern leaders, men and women who have fostered trust through civility and demonstrated strategic vision, and who knew how to think anew when necessary. I have also seen leaders squander trust and lack civility. I was personally approached for help in saving the presidencies of both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan at the lowest point in their White House tenures, during the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals, respectively. I declined the former and accepted the latter request for help based on the deceptively simple element of trust, and how much faith I had in each president’s sincerity and character.

As I write this at the end of my career, our country has lost its sense of strategic direction and common purpose. Our politics have entered a period of hyper-partisanship and gridlock. Overseas we are transitioning from a unipolar world of uncontested American power to a multipolar world where we face challenges to our interests and security from multiple directions. Allies question our once trusted leadership. Dangers gather on every front. Put simply, our country is in deep trouble.

We have come to this impasse in large part because of a great deterioration of civility over the past decade and a half. Today, too many in Congress, including many in the so-called "Tea Party," claim to revere the Constitution, and yet they reject the spirit of consensus-building and compromise that created it in the first place. The Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia was an exercise in bargaining and compromise by men from states large and small, free and slave, rich and poor, farming and trading. To deal with those profound differences, the Framers had to negotiate and compromise at every turn. To allow future leaders to improve the imperfect bargain they made, they also built into the Constitution enormous flexibility through the power of Amendment, suggesting the perpetual need for reform. Reform is both a core Constitutional value and a central theme throughout American history, an instinct for self-improvement and belief in the possibility of an ever more perfect union that served as the inspiration for many of our proudest accomplishments as a nation.

The "miracle of Philadelphia" is a story of compromise to its core. Indeed, practically the only matter on which the Framers would not compromise once they committed themselves to a union of democratic states was the very idea of the United States of America. As the Founders exited Independence Hall following their secret deliberations, a fellow citizen asked Benjamin Franklin what form of government they had settled upon. Franklin's answer, and the warning it implies, echoes down through the ages. "A republic, if you can keep it."

Today too many politicians seem utterly opposed to any of the compromises required for our Constitutional system of republican federalism to function at all. It must be their way, or no way. That fundamental lack of civility and respect among political partisans has in turn produced a profound deficit of trust. And just as civility is the springboard for trust, so too is trust the springboard for compromise and cooperation, the essential ingredients of democratic governance. Without them our leaders lack the political consensus required to take the country to higher ground. So on top of this deficit of civility and trust, we also confront a leadership deficit.



*The Korean War was a "crucible of leadership" for a young Lieutenant David Abshire, fresh out of West Point, who received a Bronze Star Medal with V for Valor as a company commander in combat.*

We as a people are now living with the bitter fruits of this dysfunction. We can see it in the political gridlock that led to the downgrading of the United States' credit rating for the first time in history. It's evident in the routine budgetary impasses that diminish the strength of an already stressed U.S. military even as dangers gather, and in domestic infrastructure that was once the envy of the world, now crumbling into disrepair and obsolescence. It's there for all the world to see in a political discourse of embarrassing crudeness and banality. We are in danger of becoming a nation so absorbed by our divisions and bitter internal squabbles that we no longer attempt great deeds, nor dare lead free peoples.

Can American exceptionalism be preserved, and trust and civility returned to our nation's capital? I believe that is not only possible, but absolutely necessary. If I were to advise the next generation, I would thus suggest acquainting themselves with the wisdom and habits of our best leaders. Their examples would tell us to reinvigorate a politics of lively, robust debate within a framework of respect and civil behavior. Only by shifting our national discussion from the emotional to the intellectual, from impugning personal motives to embracing shared objectives, can trust take root again and grow strong enough to enable our system of governance to function as it was designed.

Franklin D. Roosevelt showed uncanny strategic vision and a burning desire to reform the old ways both in his New Deal programs to pull a staggering nation out of the Great Depression, and with his strategic pivot to prepare the nation to fight and win World War II. Roosevelt was a lifelong Democrat who was ferociously partisan in his early time in office. And yet as need dictated, Roosevelt underwent a remarkable transformation. He became a master of civility, reaching out and working with Republicans as the war clouds gathered, eventually recruiting even isolationists into a unified front to achieve victory. He knew how to think anew, reform and organize the nation, and bring in those with the most talent, regardless of party or personal affinity, to face the great challenges of his time.

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Throughout my career I have personally witnessed trust similarly achieved through civility. By “civility” I do not mean simply following rules of etiquette. Nor does civility require that you agree with someone else or sacrifice strongly held beliefs or opinions. Rather, true civility starts with the practice of respectful listening. From that underappreciated talent understanding can be gained, which in turn serves as the basis for honest dialogue that builds trust. Such honest and respectful exchanges foster creativity in developing solutions to common challenges, the ultimate goal in the art of self-governance.

Dwight Eisenhower also exhibited the leadership traits I most value and espouse: civility, a progressive drive and strategic vision. With his experience leading the largest military invasion in history, Eisenhower was exceptionally well-suited to the challenges of his time as president. He recognized the great scope and danger of the Soviet threat, and launched “Project Solarium” to determine the best strategy for confronting it. He developed a “long haul” strategy for underwriting military power with sustainable economic growth.



*A Bright Future Ahead: Abshire, then staff director of the House Republican Policy Committee in the late 1950s, huddles with Congressman Gerald R. Ford, and Vice President Richard Nixon of the Eisenhower Administration.*

More than any President since James Monroe, Eisenhower established parameters for using and husbanding U.S. military power, resisting immense pressure to intervene on behalf of the French at Dien Ben Phu in Vietnam, a restraint that his successor Lyndon Johnson would later abandon to his everlasting regret. In contrast to his carefully cultivated image as an amiable old duffer, Dwight Eisenhower was the consummate Grand Strategist.

Let me explain what I mean by grand strategy and strategic vision. When writing about a strategic mindset, I reference habits of conceptualization that bring order to the complex interactions between governments and peoples, the better to get the big, global issues right. The kind of strategic leadership that Roosevelt and Eisenhower exhibited requires marshalling the best and brightest individuals, regardless of political leanings, to examine issues from all angles, and thus developing the kinds of comprehensive approaches that are the essence of Grand Strategy.

Of course strategies in wartime, when the lifeblood of the nation is at stake, are about marshalling troops and resources to defeat an enemy. The perfect military strategy, however, was defined by Sun Tzu, who described it as winning against a foe without having to fight, as we did with victory in the Cold War. But a true “Grand Strategy” takes into account all elements of the nation’s well-being and health –cultural, socio-economic, technological, military and geopolitical. It harnesses all elements of national power to a strategic blueprint for progress.



Abshire shares a light moment with President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush in the Old Executive Office Building.

I mention strategic vision and a thirst for progress in tandem because they are integral to the character of many of our best leaders, and to the nation as a whole. In sizing up America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, "The great privilege of America does not consist in being more enlightened than other nations, but in being able to repair the faults they may commit." That's why I have always believed that reform is critical to the enduring success of nations. The desire to look anew at the old ways of doing things has played a central role in my lifelong work leading think tanks.

When he was elected President, Ronald Reagan was known as a fierce Cold Warrior, a strong conservative, and an unapologetic partisan. Not a back alley fighter, perhaps, but certainly not a master of civility in political leadership either. However, on a personal level, the man himself embodied the principles of civility. His applications of the principles of civility were natural and easy for him, not because he was an actor by profession, but because at his core, he was a gentle and profoundly decent man.

As I personally witnessed, Ronald Reagan knew what he believed, and why he believed it, and he had the courage of his convictions. This shone through, and Reagan's innate civility and trustworthiness was ultimately able to bridge the chasm of forty years of hostility and Cold War distrust that yawned between him and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. By practicing what I call the "martial art of civility," these two leaders succeeded in changing the world.

When analyzing the partisan dysfunction that increasingly characterizes American politics today, many commentators point to the lack of a unifying threat such as Ronald Reagan confronted with the Soviet Union, or Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman faced in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, or Abraham Lincoln faced with Civil War. I believe they are wrong. Indeed, I believe such an existential threat becomes clearer with each passing day: the decline of America as a global power and as the standard bearer for the Western alliances of free peoples.

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The lights on the "shining city on a hill" that Ronald Reagan championed are dimming. If current trends are not reversed, American power will continue to wane, the prosperity of our people will steadily deteriorate, and radical elements will take root in the body politic. This debilitating process of decline has already begun, making this period analogous to 1861, 1941 and 1947 in terms of the existential threat we face as a nation. If this slide is not reversed then the current and future stewards of the "great American experiment" will have failed, earning shame from all their forebears stretching back to the Founding Fathers.

I have no doubt what is needed to restore an America without peer: reform, grand strategy, and inspired presidential leadership. Reform, because a driving hunger for self-improvement is woven into our national fabric, and has seen us through many dark days. A grand strategy is required to identify the most promising pathways for achieving our long-term goals, while ensuring a reasoned relationship between ends and means. Inspired presidential leadership because only our chief executive and commander-in-chief can rally the people to embrace a cause greater than themselves, the essence of "American exceptionalism."

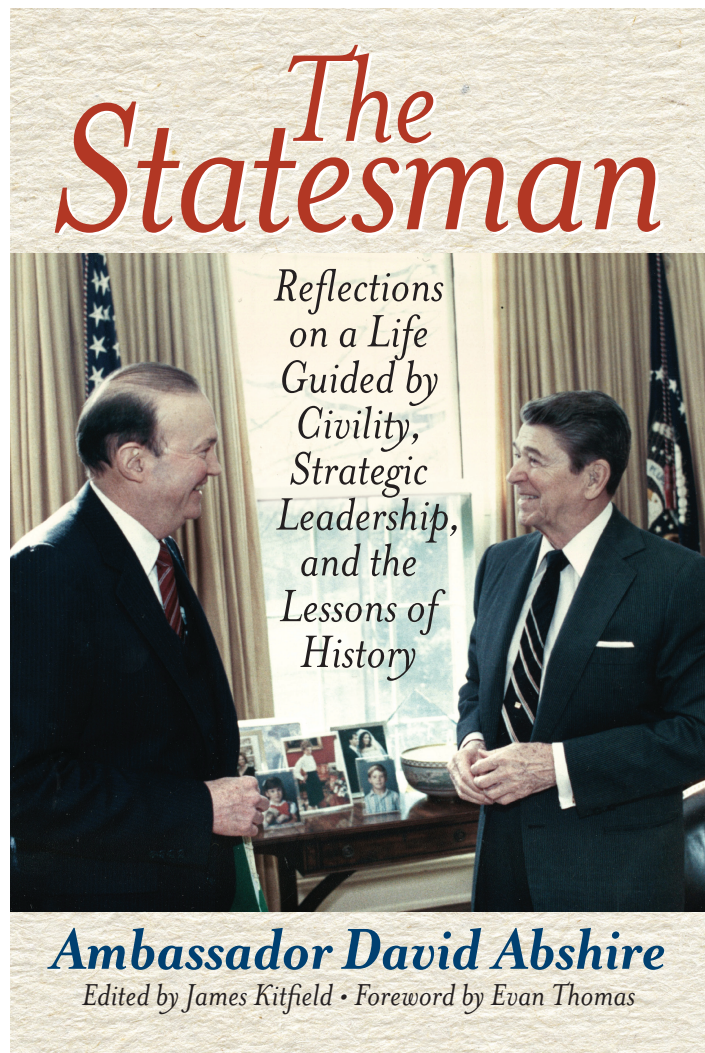
Despite the outsized shadow we have cast over the past century, American preeminence and strategic leadership were never guaranteed or preordained. Our exalted position was attained through strategic acumen and great national sacrifice, and our leadership was bestowed by those allies who chose freely to follow our example. That kind of leadership is precious and tenuous, and must always be protected with great vigilance.

Doing so requires that current and future stewards in the White House and Congress must exhibit and hone the skills exemplified by our most inspirational leaders going back to the Founding Fathers.

We also need to pay attention to what is happening around us. The worthy citizen is engaged in society, not standing on the sidelines in repose, but aware, constantly learning and applying those lessons to the betterment of all, taking part in the events that will shape their own slice of history. Only thus can we preserve what Abraham Lincoln called “the world’s last, best hope.” Should any generation of Americans fail in that task, as Lincoln warned, then history will not forgive them.

If I can emphasize just one enduring lesson from my own life, it’s that realizing the promise of our shared destiny requires trust in each other, today as much as ever before. Strategic leadership and the tonic of reform—central themes in every American success, and guiding lights along the pathway to the American dream—require trust in each other. Our greatest leaders have been able to conjure that trust even in some of our darkest moments as a nation. As I contemplate the end of my own long career, that thought gives me hope for future generations of Americans.

*The late David M. Abshire was formerly the president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, a co-founder of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the U.S. Ambassador to NATO. Among his many government positions he was special counselor to President Ronald Reagan during the Iran-Contra controversy. This essay is excerpted from his forthcoming memoir, “Statesman: Reflections on a Life Guided by Civility, Strategic Leadership, and the Lessons of History” (Rowan and Littlefield).*



*Book Cover: Abshire meeting privately with Ronald Reagan. Abshire would look back on his role in restoring the nation’s trust in a faltering Reagan presidency as one of the proudest accomplishment in his 70 years of public service.*

“The Statesman: Reflections on a Life Guided by Civility, Strategic Leadership, and the Lessons of History” is in pre-production and will be released in early 2018.