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E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One



Dear United States of America,

There is a phrase on your Great Seal that I have always found quietly remarkable. Not the grand statements of the Declaration, not the careful machinery of the Constitution — but three small Latin words tucked beneath an eagle’s wings: “E Pluribus Unum.” Out of many, one. It sounds almost too simple. It was anything but. You were not born a nation. You were born thirteen separate worlds. Massachusetts and Virginia had been founded two decades apart, by people of different faiths, different economies, different temperaments, and different ideas about what a good society looked like. The Puritan merchant of Boston and the tobacco planter of the Tidewater regarded each other with something not far from suspicion. Carolina had its rice and its Low Country aristocracy, Pennsylvania its Quaker pragmatism and its polyglot immigrant streets, New York its Dutch inheritance and its appetite for commerce. These were not merely different provinces. They were, in almost every meaningful sense, different civilizations — sharing a coastline and a king, and not much else.

From the early seventeenth century onward, each colony had grown its own legal structures, its own assemblies, its own sense of itself. They traded with one another but governed themselves apart. What Britain failed to understand was that the habits of self-governance it had allowed to develop in these distant settlements would, when threatened, become the source of revolution. The grievances came gradually, then all at once. Taxes levied without colonial representation. Standing armies quartered in private homes. Courts stripped of their customary independence. Trade strangled by legislation written for London’s benefit rather than America’s. Jefferson, in the Declaration, called it “a long train of abuses” — the phrase of a people who had tried patience and petition and found both ignored. Thomas Paine, that fiery English immigrant who had arrived in Philadelphia just two years before independence and immediately understood what was at stake, put it more bluntly in “Common Sense”: the relationship between the colonies and the Crown was not a family bond but a commercial arrangement gone badly wrong, and no sentiment should stand in the way of ending it. Paine’s pamphlet sold a hundred thousand copies in three months. It was the first American bestseller, and it changed the temperature of a continent.

What happened next had no real precedent in the history of the world. Thirteen colonies — quarrelsome, proud, geographically scattered, culturally distinct — chose to act as one. They sent delegates to Philadelphia. They argued, negotiated, compromised, and argued again. And then, in the summer of 1776, they signed their names to a document that made them traitors to the Crown and founders of something new under the sun.

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George Washington held the Continental Army together through winters that would have broken a lesser man's nerve and a lesser cause's momentum. He did it not with the resources of an established state but with the belief — shared, remarkably, across thirteen fractious governments — that the thing they were fighting for was worth the fighting. When it was over, when the treaty was signed and the redcoats had sailed, the harder question remained: could the unity forged in revolution survive the peace? The answer, it turned out, was yes — but only just, and only through another act of collective invention: the Constitution of 1787, which took the loose confederation of sovereign states and wove them, carefully and contentiously, into a republic. Not a nation that erased its differences, but one that found a way to govern across them. The many did not become one by forgetting what they were. They became one by agreeing, against all odds, that the experiment was worth trying. Two hundred and fifty years on, that experiment continues. It has survived civil war and depression, the long reckoning with its own contradictions, the stress fractures of every generation's politics. It has never been easy, and it was never meant to be. E Pluribus Unum. Out of many, one. Three words on a seal — and, one likes to think, the most ambitious promise any nation has ever made to itself.

Yours, with great admiration and transatlantic devotion,

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