"United we stand; divided we fall," Patrick Henry wrote in 1785. Other Founders also extolled unity. "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all," quipped Thomas Jefferson. "There is nothing which I dread so much," John Adams remarked, "as a division of the republic into two great parties."

But they had it wrong: They were too close to their own creation to grasp its genius. The strength of the young republic and the key to its success lay not in its fictional unity but in its ability to tolerate opposition and sustain political division.

Barack Obama's ardent, heartfelt promise to bring Americans together and turn the nation's capital into a place of bipartisan harmony not only buys into the seductive myth of national unity but misconstrues the very essence of democracy -- which is nonviolent political conflict.

James Madison marveled that the delegates at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 agreed on a Constitution "with a unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected." Such concord was nearly a miracle, he wrote, in which one could see "a finger of that Almighty hand."

But after that foundational moment, unity was not to be expected again. Indeed, the Constitution that Madison and his colleagues gave us represented an agreement to disagree. The new government was carefully structured so that people and interest groups, as well as the executive and legislative branches, would clash and collide rather than concur. And the political parties that evolved in the 1790s added even more discord to the mix.

Would it have been possible to design a government that fostered unity? That dream could indeed have been achieved, Madison explained, by summarily outlawing factions, but the cost would have been freedom itself. "Liberty is to faction," he wrote, "what air is to fire. . . . But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air."

What Obama and others, captivated by the notion of unity, could reasonably promise is not national unity but simply unity within the Democratic Party or within the Republican Party. For Republicans and Democrats do not and should not agree. Different, competing visions of the public good are the lifeblood of a dynamic and open democracy. They strengthen our democracy, engage citizens in meaningful political debate and keep us awake.

When tumult is absent, when everyone in a state is tranquil, Machiavelli wrote, "we can be sure that it is not a republic." Out of unity, Obama believes, change will somehow emerge. But only insignificant or incremental changes can come out of the compromises that are reached through consensus. Transformational change, on the other hand, is the product of conflict and polarization.

The greatest transformational president of the 20th century was Franklin D. Roosevelt. True, consensus was the name of his game during his first years in office, when he needed to get emergency recovery legislation through Congress. Then, he managed to keep on board moderate Republicans, independents and even conservative Southern Democrats. But as the New Deal became more transformational in 1935 -- with Social Security, the National Labor Relations Act and that year's highly progressive Revenue Act -- conservatives jumped ship, and FDR's leadership strategy changed dramatically.

Because his policies truly challenged the status quo, conservatives attacked him, and he attacked back. "They are united in their hatred for me," he jubilantly exclaimed to a roaring crowd at Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1936, "and I welcome their hatred!" FDR was willing to ignite and exploit conflict -- and fight for meaningful change.
The Case for Disunity

Yes, we need some consensus and unity in our society -- we must have a fundamental agreement about our constitutional system itself, and we must agree about citizens' rights and freedoms. But there is something almost regressive in longing for more unity than that, for it suggests a dreamy nostalgia for an imaginary golden age of well-being and security in the bosom of a harmonious, loving family.

It may be comforting to believe that consensus and unity are somehow healthier, more noble, less disruptive and destructive than sharp partisan battles. But it is the rough-and-tumble game of adversarial politics that preserves our freedom. Three cheers for disunity!

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