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We Must Be Founders

To fulfill this nation's promise as a multiracial democracy requires more than tinkering around the edges. Renewal requires bottom-up transformation.

By **Michael McAfee** | May 6, 2024



(Illustration by Diana Ejaita)

After this nation was founded under the revolutionary idea that all are created equal, its Constitution invited us to bring its ideal to life with the words “We, the People.”

Today, this promise remains unfulfilled. Yet it is precisely at this moment, when democracy is being challenged from all sides, and when the limitations of our nearly 250 years of governing are coming to a breaking point, that we

must rise up and fulfill this mandate. Building a truly multiracial democracy—the one that has not yet existed but is ours to create—will be the work of our generation.

We take up this aspirational, prophetic struggle from our ancestors who worked together for change. It is their work that made **democracy more real**—even when doing so seemed unimaginable. It will be our duty, no matter the headwinds, to transform our democracy and economy in service of our collective flourishing, toward a country that works for *all*.

We will only get there by closing the chasm between those for whom this democracy has always worked and those yet to reap the benefits of this great nation. Only a profound transformation in how this country is governed will we have a chance at building the true democracy we need.



Realizing a Multiracial Democracy for All

Despite the revolutionary idea that all are created equal, the American promise of “We, the People” remains unfulfilled. This series, sponsored by PolicyLink, explores how each of us can carry forward the work of generations before us to realize a flourishing nation designed for all of its people.



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This work is urgent. A third of the people in this country, nearly 100 million, **live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level**, where the loss of income from even a short-term illness can be insurmountable. Many above this line are also struggling to make ends meet. Trust in **government** is at near-record lows because none have yet delivered for all. An unchecked Supreme Court is finishing a 50-year effort to lay waste to the freedoms won by the movements of the last century.

The only solution to these crises is to take up the generations-long work to build an alternative where all can thrive, where our governing systems are built to honor the humanity in everyone and work in

service of everyone's thriving. In this future, all in America will participate in a flourishing democracy, prosper in an equitable economy, and live in thriving communities of opportunity.

To change peoples' material reality, however, means rehauling the entire operating system of our democracy, not just tinkering with its policies. We need to be much more aspirational and long-term in our thinking. We need to reimagine our laws, regulations, customs, and institutions.

This founders' orientation is not just idealistic thinking. It won't be easy. But in neighborhoods across this country, every day, people are already planting the seeds to grow this alternative vision. The best of our nation has been scaled up from the grassroots level to function at all levels of government, and demanded by communities who held the government accountable to its duties.

Historically, for example, Black public health leaders in Pittsburgh created **Freedom House Ambulance Services** after being neglected by police-staffed ambulances. The paramedic training and ambulance design standards pioneered in the Freedom House Ambulance Service helped set the national public health standard for emergency care. Today, in the face of an escalating housing crisis, tenants are organizing to create **new community ownership model policies for housing** that are spreading across the country. On the federal level, the temporary measures put in place during the early years of the pandemic, advocated for by communities—**direct cash assistance, expanded child tax credits, free public transit, and free school meals**—showed us that this level of delivery from the government is possible, necessary, and powerful. The expanded (but now expired) child tax credits alone **cut childhood poverty by 30 percent in only six months**.

We can see the possibility of transformation in accomplishments like these, but they can be rolled back, and in many cases have already been. If our government's fundamental nature and logic are not transformed, such progress can never truly be sustained. Piecemeal responses will be chipped away, from administration to administration. We need foundational, structural change, to make these examples not exceptions to the norm, but rather flowing out of the basic logic of how our governments operate. But to make these success stories ubiquitous means building a government and economy that would support such outcomes.

I invite you to imagine with me what this would look like.

What if we had a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that took its mandate to ensure human flourishing rather than real estate profit? In a multiracial democracy, HUD would actively shape the housing market so that everyone could afford a place to live—so that millions of families don't have to worry whether they can make rent at the beginning every month. A parent at the grocery store wouldn't have to choose between buying enough food to feed her family or making the rent the next day, and could rest assured that they could stay in their homes and communities for generations to come.

What if we had an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that guaranteed access to safe and affordable drinking water for everyone in the country instead of only for some? This EPA would hold polluters, utility companies, and corporations accountable for this mission. Amends would be made for the harm done to communities' water supply by fossil fuel extraction and industry. New generations would not know what it would be like not to trust water that comes out of the tap to be safe.

What if community residents had trust in local governments because they had real decision-making power around the buses and roads that take them to work, the schools their children attend, the housing available to them, and otherwise how their collective tax dollars are spent? In this future, local mayors would be committed and held accountable to these collaborative governance models to redistribute capital, power, and resources to benefit everyone.

We must believe that these transformations are possible. We must own the right to make this country better, on our terms. We can and must be the founders of a nation where all have equal protection, our economy is designed to benefit people and the planet, not just profit, and we have rectified the harms of the past to open the possibility of a new future.

Ultimately, this vision must be supported by a living Constitution that is reflective of who we are as a people. Recent Supreme Court rulings using originalism as the underlying legal theory in interpreting the Constitution literally bind the laws of our nation to the century's old legal standards of the original Constitution, a document that was designed to serve only about four million people in 13 states, and which did not include women, enslaved people, or people who were indigenous to this land. Until now, it has been amended 27 times—to abolish slavery, and to grant formerly enslaved people and Indigenous people the rights of citizenship and the right to vote. Amendments to the Constitution adopted this century gave women the right to vote and abolished poll taxes. But it's been over 50 years

since our Constitution was amended. Changing the Constitution will be hard work, taking years or even decades to accomplish. I will be part of the generational work of re-founding this nation.

Leaders across sectors all have a critical role to play in the journey to renew our nation. Government leaders must reimagine their roles and interrogate the ways they have failed to see humanity in all. Politicians must see the gaps where policy is not serving all people, and advance legislation to further this generational work. The nonprofit sector must reimagine our institutions to serve all—beginning with those who have been historically excluded—and hold governments accountable to their duties. Philanthropy must be willing to fund this work for the long haul, being full partners in this vision.

The founders had a vision nearly 250 years ago, and we're in the throes of a debate about what will become of the next 250 years of this nation. It's now up to us to decide what this country will be and whether we can make it a place where everyone can thrive. We can either rise to this moment or risk the consequences of failure. As social scientist John Gardner **said**, "Unless we attend to the requirements of renewal, aging institutions and organizations will eventually bring our civilization to moldering ruin." Our democracy is imperfect, and it will remain imperfect even as we re-found it—but this should not dissuade us. This is the work of "We, The People," which is neither hyperbole nor wishful thinking. It is the fundamental work of our generation if we want to transform this country from its foundation. We hope you'll join us on this journey of individual and institutional self-renewal.

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