

Daniel Miller: A tent revival for the Constitution

By Daniel Miller / Oct 19, 2019

As a nation, we find ourselves at a time of historic polarization. Many of us simply refuse to listen to people in a different political camp. A significant portion of Americans are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than reality, if the facts don't match their politics.

It's time for a revival.

Remember Billy Graham's revivals that spread the Christian gospel? Today, our mass awakening needs to be based on our Constitution and Declaration of Independence.

We need a collective, almost spiritual, recommitment to our founding documents.

Such a movement could help address our crisis in civics education. (A poll in 2017 revealed that only 26 percent of Americans can name the three branches of government.) But even more important than knowledge, this tent revival for the Constitution would give us a shared sense of meaning, at a time when Americans are increasingly vulnerable to divisive, radical solutions for their spiritual dilemma.

Many of the causes of the political crisis in our country today stem from the failure of civil society to make people feel like they matter. On the right, President Donald Trump has exploited the deep sense of cultural alienation and economic insecurity held by many Americans, some of whom are more than willing to accept his nativist and racist version of populism because of their own bigotries. And on the left, increasingly unsatisfied by their highly individualistic modern lifestyles and separated from their families and home communities, many have turned for purpose to extreme forms of political correctness.

Without drawing any equivalence — the responsibility for Trump's election rests on the shoulders of Republican voters, after all — it is hard to see a positive path forward for our country unless its political extremes de-radicalize. This is where the tent revival comes in. It would help to fill our spiritual void that leaves us vulnerable to radicalization.

What would such a revival look like?

Perhaps it would look like one of Billy Graham's revivals, or "crusades" as they were called (an unfortunate name that he would later change to "missions"). Graham would rent out a stadium or another large venue in a given city for days and or weeks on end, and listeners from all political stripes would flock there to hear him preach the gospel.

Instead of learning about Scripture, participants at constitutional revivals would learn about the importance of our founding documents and our founding values to being a good citizen. Instead of receiving a Bible, these constitutional revivalists would receive a copy of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence or a Federalist paper.

Would this kind of thing really appeal to people? I believe so. In some ways, what I'm calling for would resemble a Trump rally. There would be lines around the block to get into a large arena, inspirational speakers who can whip up the crowd, and TV audiences in the millions. The content, of course, would be completely different.

Instead of statements mocking the rule of law, a speaker — perhaps a particularly charismatic law professor — would tell the crowd about how a federal judge named John Sirica, a man with no army or navy, once stood up to the most powerful man in the world. She would recount what happened not so long ago in our nation: Sirica faced President Richard Nixon and ordered that he turn over the White House tapes. And Nixon eventually handed them over, an action that would lead to his resignation.

Instead of calling the press the enemy of the people, a journalist would tell a story about the libel trial of New York publisher John Peter Zenger: how in 1735, Andrew Hamilton, one of the great lawyers in America at the time, successfully defended Zenger by arguing that instead of making it a crime to speak ill of the government, the truth should be a defense to libel in this land.

Instead of praising Confederate generals who committed treason to preserve slavery, a civil rights leader like John Lewis would talk to us about how America must fully reckon with its original sins to live up to its extraordinary promise — how we must confront and prevail over the racism that is entrenched in too many of our people and institutions, to finally make this country a fair and just place for people of color.

Instead of spreading conspiracy theories about the “deep state,” former government officials and members of the armed forces would tell the crowd about the importance of duty and service. Perhaps they would share the story of Nathan Hale, our nation's first spy, whose last words before being executed by the British were said to be: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

And instead of calling to make America great again, we would learn about the unique greatness that America already possesses. We would hear how at the time of our Revolution, no nation of consequence had been governed according to democratic principles since the Roman Republic nearly 2,000 years before. We would learn how our founders emphatically declared to the world that the people could and must rule themselves. We would renew our patriotic belief that today, our country, for all its flaws, is the greatest democracy in the world.

Fervent crowds of Americans of both parties, gathered to celebrate the virtues of our nation, might sound far-fetched, given how divided our country is.

But at a time when Americans are looking to believe in something, is it such a radical idea that we recommit ourselves to believing in America?

Daniel Miller is a lawyer and activist in Philadelphia.

He wrote this piece for The Washington Post.

