

Power to Pursue Happiness

Joseph Kennedy III

The Declaration of Independence lists the “pursuit of Happiness” as one of the rights that government is duty-bound to protect. Yet in the United States, decades of conservative and neoliberal policies have made that right illusory for far too many. By several metrics – economic inequality, life expectancy, and the alarming growth in so-called deaths of despair – it has become clear that the government has failed to provide most Americans with a basic level of security, much less with the chance to pursue lives of meaning and connectedness. A major reason for this failure is the distortion of the American political system, which is increasingly beholden to a small minority. We need a renaissance of civic engagement and local activism to challenge the systemic barriers to well-being, restore our democracy, and make our government attentive to public happiness in all its dimensions.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Few passages are more deeply ingrained in the American consciousness than the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. Because the words are so familiar – memorized by schoolchildren, recited by citizens on the Fourth of July, invoked by politicians at every turn – we seldom pause to consider their deeper meaning, especially the radical significance of that final phrase: the pursuit of happiness. Generations of Americans have shed blood in defense of our conceptions of life and liberty, while the pursuit of happiness has seldom stood alone as a rallying cry for our armies, our social movements, or our history-making moments.

And yet the Declaration of Independence is unequivocal. It enshrines the pursuit of happiness as one of the rights that government is duty-bound to protect. Unfortunately, in recent decades, our political choices have rendered the pursuit of happiness a luxury, instead of the birthright proclaimed by the Declaration. Since the Reagan administration, conservatives have redefined the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of profit, convincing many that government is merely a barrier to that end. In response, Democrats have often been too quick to abandon

the party's foundational belief that an active government is a necessary counterweight to capitalism's inequities and abuses. The ensuing policies – privatization, deregulation, tax cuts, and means testing – have diverted an ever-larger share of our wealth to an ever-smaller segment of our population, leaving everyone else to fight over the scraps.

The consequences have been stark. Americans today are deeply unhappy. In 2019, the World Happiness Report registered a 6 percent decline in overall life satisfaction among Americans between 2007 and 2018.¹ In 2015, Americans' life expectancy fell for the first time in decades, and it did so again in 2016 and 2017.² Much of the decline was attributable to what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton term "deaths of despair": suicides, drug overdoses, and fatal alcohol poisoning.³ In the mid-1990s, the United States experienced about 69,000 deaths of despair annually; in 2017, the figure was 158,000.⁴ In 2021 alone, nearly 108,000 Americans died of drug overdoses, a record level, and a 15 percent increase over the 2020 toll.⁵ Although scholars debate the sources of this carnage, Case and Deaton trace it to the devastation wrought by decades of *laissez-faire* policies: "Destroy work, and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive."⁶ It is as much a crisis of contributive justice – the idea that we each deserve to contribute to our communities – as it is one of economic justice, as depressed wages and vanishing jobs lead to feelings of futility and isolation.⁷

The crises of inequality and social disintegration are not unique to America. But they are especially stark in the world's wealthiest nation, a nation that prides itself on democracy and pledges itself to an idea as optimistic and ambitious as true happiness. As Jenna Bednar observes, the COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored the United States' failure to assure the basic health, happiness, and well-being of most of its people.⁸ In November 2020, almost 37,000 Americans died of SARS-CoV-2.⁹ That same month, the Dow Jones reached an all-time high.¹⁰ While large swaths of the economy went remote, so-called essential workers – disproportionately Black, Latino, and immigrant workers – faced a terrible choice: risk their lives in grocery stores and emergency rooms every day, or forfeit their already inadequate wages. It was not just the most economically vulnerable who suffered. The pandemic forced middle-class families to balance full-time work with full-time childcare. It strained our labyrinthine health care system to the breaking point, making it even harder for those with chronic conditions to get basic treatment. It ignited a mental health crisis among our youth.¹¹ And it sank small businesses in communities from coast to coast.

We know that the pandemic's fallout would have been far worse without government intervention at all levels.¹² To cite just one widely touted example, the American Rescue Plan included an expanded child tax credit, which kept 3.7 million children from being thrown into poverty.¹³ That's an extraordinary achieve-

ment, both for the children spared the pains of scarcity, and for the parents who had just a little less to worry about. But Congress let the credit lapse after six months, casting it aside as an emergency measure no longer needed after vaccines became widely available.¹⁴

Therein lies the problem. It should not take a pandemic for Congress to pass a policy as beneficial as the child tax credit. A government fulfilling its duty to protect the pursuit of happiness would embrace a policy like the child tax credit as a commonsense obligation rather than a temporary tool for exceptional circumstances. Indeed, a government committed to protecting the pursuit of happiness would have implemented the credit before the pandemic, alongside other policies aimed at removing sources of unhappiness, such as poverty, sickness, hunger, homelessness, and oppression.

Without sufficient income, quality health care, adequate food, stable housing, and basic freedom, human beings cannot flourish – they can only endure. President Franklin Roosevelt made this point in 1936 when, recalling the vast inequities that preceded the Great Depression, he said, “For too many of us, life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁵ What Roosevelt said of the United States in the early 1930s applies to the United States in the early 2020s. Once again, economic disparity has made the pursuit of happiness a mirage for too many Americans. And once again, government must step in. Decades of deregulation, privatization, and a threadbare safety net have shown that the market economy alone will not provide the security every person deserves. As Roosevelt understood, when the state acts to help those in need, it does not threaten liberty. It gives people the wherewithal to *exercise* their liberty.

Of course, meeting a person’s basic needs is only half the battle. To treat someone as merely a stomach to feed, a body to clothe, or as labor to hire is to treat them as less than fully human. Sadly, our competitive, market-dominated conception of happiness often diminishes people in just this way, regarding them as an input to be optimized rather than as living beings to be respected. Robert F. Kennedy eloquently described what this short-sightedness costs us. Speaking in 1968, he lamented policy-makers’ myopic tendency to measure national strength in terms of gross national product (GNP). GNP, he pointed out, measures bombs and bullets, but “does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.” It measures everything “except that which makes life worthwhile.”¹⁶

If the Declaration of Independence is so explicit about the right to pursue happiness, why has our government failed to ensure a decent standard of living for all? Why has it focused so narrowly on the value a person creates, rather than on whether that person is free to live a life enriched by a sense of purpose, a nurturing community, equal justice, and the chance to enjoy natural and artistic beauty?

One of the major reasons is the concentration of power. As economic strength has become the chief metric of our government's success, our system has become more sensitive to the interests of those who own much than to the needs of those who own little. To be sure, American democracy has never been perfect. From its birth, it has been biased toward wealth and marred by institutionalized racism and sexism. In the twentieth century, however, we made significant strides toward a more inclusive republic through victories like the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

But our work for a more perfect union is not complete, and today, it faces serious threats. As more Americans have won the rights of citizenship, those who have long held power have sought to grip it more tightly. We see this reaction in various forms: in the resurgence of voter suppression and White supremacy, which has renewed the old and ugly fight over who counts as an American; in widespread gerrymandering, which magnifies the power of some at the expense of others while encouraging partisan gridlock; and in the exploitation of the Electoral College and the undemocratic U.S. Senate, which have been deformed from guardrails against popular excesses into bulwarks against progress. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has gutted the Voting Rights Act, washed its hands of any responsibility to address partisan gerrymandering, and blessed unfathomable levels of political spending, making it much harder to repair our ailing system.¹⁷

The Declaration of Independence tells us that governments “deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed.” But we have strayed dangerously far from this self-evident truth with disastrous consequences for Americans' happiness. As envisioned by the likes of James Madison, our system was designed to encourage compromises that would shape competing interests into broadly beneficial policies.¹⁸ This ideal still holds power. During my four terms in Congress, I knew members of both parties who earnestly wanted to address the challenges confronting our nation. But because of the democratic decay I have described, they were trapped by a system that incentivizes performative politics and the maintenance of political power over collaboration and compromise.

As proud as I am of my service in Congress, my time there left me convinced that major changes are urgently needed, and that the momentum for those changes must come from outside the system. We cannot expect those who have worked so hard to consolidate their power to surrender it unilaterally, nor can we expect the government to legislate for all of us as long as its structures are warped to serve a few of us. Restoring a government of, by, and for the people requires an engaged and active populace that can access, pressure, and hold accountable the systems that shape their daily lives. That's why I have devoted my post-congressional life to building political power at the local level. I founded Groundwork Project to support people organizing for a more just and equitable future in communities

across the Plains, the Deep South, and Appalachia that do not often benefit from sustained investment in civic activism.

This kind of local civic engagement can be hard and thankless work. Americans would be well-justified to ask why they should fight to improve a government that has so often failed to fight for them. The answer is that our common happiness depends on it. As fellow citizens, our fates are intertwined. Inequality, democratic backsliding, climate change, a global pandemic: history tells us that some of us can escape the worst consequences of these challenges for some time, but none of us can escape them for all time. To truly secure human flourishing in America, we must set our nation on a different course. We must redirect our government's energies from the pursuit of profit for some to the pursuit of happiness for all. The Declaration tells us that we have the right to demand this change. Whether we have the will is up to us.

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ENDNOTES

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