Value Tension—conflict between two equally desirable goals.

LAW VS. ETHICS

Law—rules established by custom and history and enforced by government. Law includes both written statutes and stated policies.

We are a nation of laws. But American heroes have protested or even rebelled against laws that were unethical. When is the time for protest?

Ethics—system of moral standards and individual conscience that guides behavior and thought.

PRIVATE WEALTH VS. COMMON WEALTH

Private Wealth—resources such as income, personal character, and capital—earned and kept by an individual, family, or corporation.

Accumulating individual wealth is at the heart of our economy. Yet we also contribute to the needs of the community. How do we do both?

Common Wealth—the material infrastructure and shared resources of a community, as well as the ethical relationships that exist between and among people.

FREEDOM VS. EQUALITY

Freedom—power, rights, and privileges enjoyed by an individual or group.

Too much freedom for some can threaten equality for all. But the quest for equality can limit individual freedoms. How do we find a balance?

Equality—identical treatment in society. The availability of opportunities and shared common wealth that arise from a shared sense of reciprocal duty.

UNITY VS. DIVERSITY

Unity—the pursuit of common principles and goals, often expressed through cultural norms or as nationalism and patriotism.

We celebrate our unity as one American nation. But we also cherish our diversity. How do these values sometimes clash?

Diversity—differences among individuals as well as groups of people based on race, ethnicity, religion, economic class, location, and political beliefs.
The Great Debate

Citizens must understand the American experiment as a fascinating, perpetual question mark. It is a story that instills a pride based on the belief not that America is superior to all other countries but that it is unique, youthful, admirable, and open to unfulfilled human possibilities. The American experiment is, at its soul, an enduring debate. This debate is about how the American people will secure the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, protection from martial law, immunity from illegal search and seizure, and fairness in our legal system, so elegantly stated in the Declaration of Independence as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

We can better understand the nature of that great debate by examining four sets of “value tensions”:

**LAW VS. ETHICS**

**PRIVATE WEALTH vs. COMMON WEALTH**

**FREEDOM vs. EQUALITY**

**UNITY vs. DIVERSITY**

While each of these pairs of values represents an inherent conflict, each also has a vital synergy. For example, we understand that laws are never good unless they are guided by a higher conscience or ethic, but the debate about how to balance the two values is often difficult. That was clear during the debates over slavery laws and Jim Crow laws. Private wealth is never fully realized, nor secure, unless individuals invest in communities, or the common wealth, but how much common wealth or infrastructure do we need and how much of our private wealth should we devote to obtain it? Americans celebrate their individual freedom but simultaneously understand that every person focused only on their individual freedom creates anarchy. Freedom must be tempered with some level of equality. The quest for cultural unity is inconsistent with democracy if it does not also recognize the rich diversity of individuals.

The ability to hold, concurrently, two seemingly contradictory ideals and see both as valuable and essential is the essence of the democratic mind. As the poet Henry David Thoreau put it, “Truth is always paradoxical.” Understanding, reconciling, and balancing these conflicting ideals is a skill that must be learned. The difficult decisions we make are not between good and evil. Rather, our challenge is to determine the relationship between worthy but conflicting ideals.