



# PINGRY

EXCELLENCE & HONOR

## HUNTER STIRES '15

ROBERT H. LEBOW '58 MEMORIAL ORATORICAL COMPETITION

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### “EXCEPT FOR ALL THE OTHERS”

Perhaps you've noticed, in the past few years, our ship of state has been through some rough seas. Down in Washington, D.C., Republicans and Democrats have been hopelessly divided, turning affairs inside the beltway into exercises in trench warfare. With neither side willing to make concessions or even try to find common ground, “compromise” has miraculously become a four-letter word. Last fall, in what many pundits declared to be a new low point in the history of American politics, the government of the United States of America officially stopped working for 16 days—brought to a standstill by Congressional brinkmanship. Compounding the situation was the looming deadline of the Federal debt ceiling, a point at which the government would be forced to default on its financial obligations and jeopardize the Full Faith and Credit of the United States.

Not exactly something you'd expect from what Ronald Reagan referred to as a “shining city on a hill.” That biblical phrase has been used to describe America since the 17th century, when Puritan John Winthrop encouraged his fellow colonists to build their new settlement into an example—a “city upon a hill”—for all the world to see and admire.

We haven't been doing too well on that front lately. Our nation's partisan gridlock has been costing us. The recent shutdown alone set us back tens of billions of dollars, and perhaps more importantly, our international standing took a considerable blow. Onlookers around the globe watched the mightiest nation in the world brought to its knees by a small faction of extremists in its own legislature. One of Germany's leading newspapers declared, “a superpower has paralyzed itself.” China piled on too, even going so far as to call on developing nations to help build a “de-Americanized world.”

Yet in spite of this fairly cringeworthy episode, this nation is still more than capable of thriving as a beacon of hope and freedom in the world. Democracy is a messy business. We forget that the founding mission outlined in our Constitution, “to form a more perfect union,” is not an easy one. After all, there are a whole lot of definitions of what a “more perfect union” will look like.

Those who see the altercation in Washington as a sign of America's impending downfall have short memories. Like it or not, this country is built through political discourse—and discord. Our national debate can be noisy, antagonizing, and occasionally violent. Seriously, if you think the political climate is bad now, it's got nothing on that of the Early Republic, when congressmen physically assaulted each other on the floor of the House of Representatives, and our Vice-President shot and killed our first Secretary of the Treasury on a cliff in Weehawken. I really don't see Barack Obama and Ted Cruz challenging each other to a pistol duel anytime soon. Although come to think of it, Ted Cruz is from Texas.

Regardless, Americans have always reconciled their differences and arrived at a better place. Fifty years ago, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, the national tolerance and celebration of diversity we enjoy today would have been unimaginable. Since the turbulent days of 1964, we have elected an African-American president and we have been represented abroad by three women and two African-Americans in the Office of Secretary of State. We are often so focused on navigating the challenges of the future that we forget how far we've come. What we would consider “normal” today is thanks in large part to great strife in our not-too-distant past.

Political discord is a vital part of our national fabric. The Founding Fathers created the U.S. Constitution so that we, the people of the United States, with all our ranging perspectives, values, and beliefs, would have the right to disagree. This freedom of discourse is what makes us great—the multitude of voices it protects makes our nation strong.

Even though the recent political melodrama has caused serious consternation at home and abroad, there is little doubt, at least in my mind, that the United States shall endure. The debate in our nation's capital over the last few months is just our system at work, in all its stumbling glory.

Winston Churchill, a great admirer of the United States (and an Honorary American Citizen, no less), once exclaimed that “democracy is the worst form of government”. Yes, at times, when all seems to be falling to pieces, it's easy to see his point. Democracy can be dithering, indecisive, and exasperating. But, as Churchill acknowledges, it is “the worst form of government, except for all the others.” To build John Winthrop's proverbial “city upon a hill,” there has to be some climbing involved.