

The Work of Being American

Democracy is not an inheritance. It is a practice we must choose—again and again.

What if the real challenge of democracy isn't building it—but sustaining it?

In a recent post, Heather Cox Richardson revisited the years surrounding the British occupation of Boston — that narrow band of time when resistance was not yet revolution, and independence was far from certain.

It is easy, in hindsight, to compress those years into inevitability. But nothing about them was inevitable.

A collection of colonies, loosely aligned and unevenly led, faced the most powerful military force in the world. The Continental Army was not yet an institution so much as an aspiration. Leadership had to be chosen before it had proven itself. Risk preceded structure. Resolve preceded success.

Even the turning point — the placement of cannons on Dorchester Heights — was an act of audacity built on fragile coordination and sheer will. It worked. But it did not have to.

That moment did not establish democracy.

It revealed what would always be required to sustain it.

Years later — in a fictional presidency, but in a very real voice — Michael Douglas delivers a line that cuts closer to truth than most political speeches ever do:

“America isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. You've gotta want it bad...”

The speech goes on to describe a kind of civic discipline that is almost uncomfortable to hear:

the obligation to defend speech we despise,
to tolerate protest that offends us,
to uphold rights that test our own convictions.

It is not a celebration of freedom as possession.

It is a definition of freedom as responsibility.

And that distinction matters more than we like to admit.

Somewhere between those two images — the uncertain army outside Boston and the uncomfortable demands of citizenship — another image intrudes:

Sisyphus, bent beneath a stone that will never stay where he leaves it.

Traditionally, his story is told as punishment. Futility. Endless, meaningless repetition.

But there is another way to see it.

What if the labor is not meaningless — only unending?

What if the value is not in finishing the task, but in refusing to abandon it?

Democracy, especially American democracy, tempts us into a dangerous illusion: that because it has endured, it is secure. That because it was established, it is complete.

But the founders did not complete a system.

They initiated a practice.

A practice that must be repeated in every generation:

in how we argue,

in what we tolerate,

in what we are willing to defend even when it costs us something.

The struggle in Boston did not end the work.

It began it.

The principles articulated in speeches — fictional or otherwise — do not resolve the tension.

They describe it.

And the stone, whether we acknowledge it or not, is still at the bottom of the hill every morning.

We are not asked to create a nation from nothing.

We are asked to do something both simpler and more demanding:

to carry forward what we have been given without assuming it will carry itself.

That requires persistence more than passion.

Discipline more than outrage.

Commitment more than certainty.

America is not a finished achievement.

It is an ongoing act.

And like any act worth doing,

it must be done again tomorrow.