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(Unsplash/Chris Briggs)



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I'm sure I recognize the place. The question is what happened to it?

You remember us: We're the ones who showed all the other people of the world how to be a democracy. And now our own is slipping. We vote, we donate, we wrangle over which is better political morality — lowering taxes for people who have little to no tax in the first place or raising wages for the wealthy so they can spend more in the richest country in the world.

The whole notion that politics and ethics, politics and morality, politics and the spiritual life are two sides of what it means to be Christian is a largely dying debate. Not that the topic shouldn't be debated but given what we'll take anymore — low wages, high prices, presidential power grabs — not all that surprising.

We're the people who set up two separate political parties in every state in the union. We wanted everyone to be part of every decision. And now instead of legislators who "reconcile" major bills we find ourselves surrounded by "caucuses" whose commitment to themselves is tearing the country apart.

The [State of the Union address](#) was a perfect example of this country's current political dignity. Grown men and women from some of the biggest and most prestigious universities in the country [heckled the president](#). "Liar," one shouted in a split Congress that is more against everybody else than hopeful for anyone — except themselves, of course.

We're the people who were proud of our diversity. Translation: our "immigrants" to you. The truth is that immigrants have always been a divider in the United States. But we soldiered through and kept our "diversity" [under control](#) from one decade to another in special parts of town and in special work. That kept them from getting out and up in the world and confined them to low-paying jobs their entire lives.

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We're the teachers who were proud to tell generations of students how it was that we finally opened our borders to Asians and Mediterraneans, and Russians and Polish and now the hungry in groups of thousands while we [pass bills to export them](#)

rather than integrate them. Jobs designed to allow them to grow into the language, or be offered positions they would give anything to apply for, lag. And in the end, we only create more parts of town we don't like, more people living on the streets — without papers and visas and programs that could enable them to do it.

We were the parents who told the kids that if they ever had trouble coming home from school, they should just find a policeman to help us. But then the police [became the people the kids were afraid of most](#). Being Black or brown didn't help, of course. Those kids too often found themselves ignored entirely.

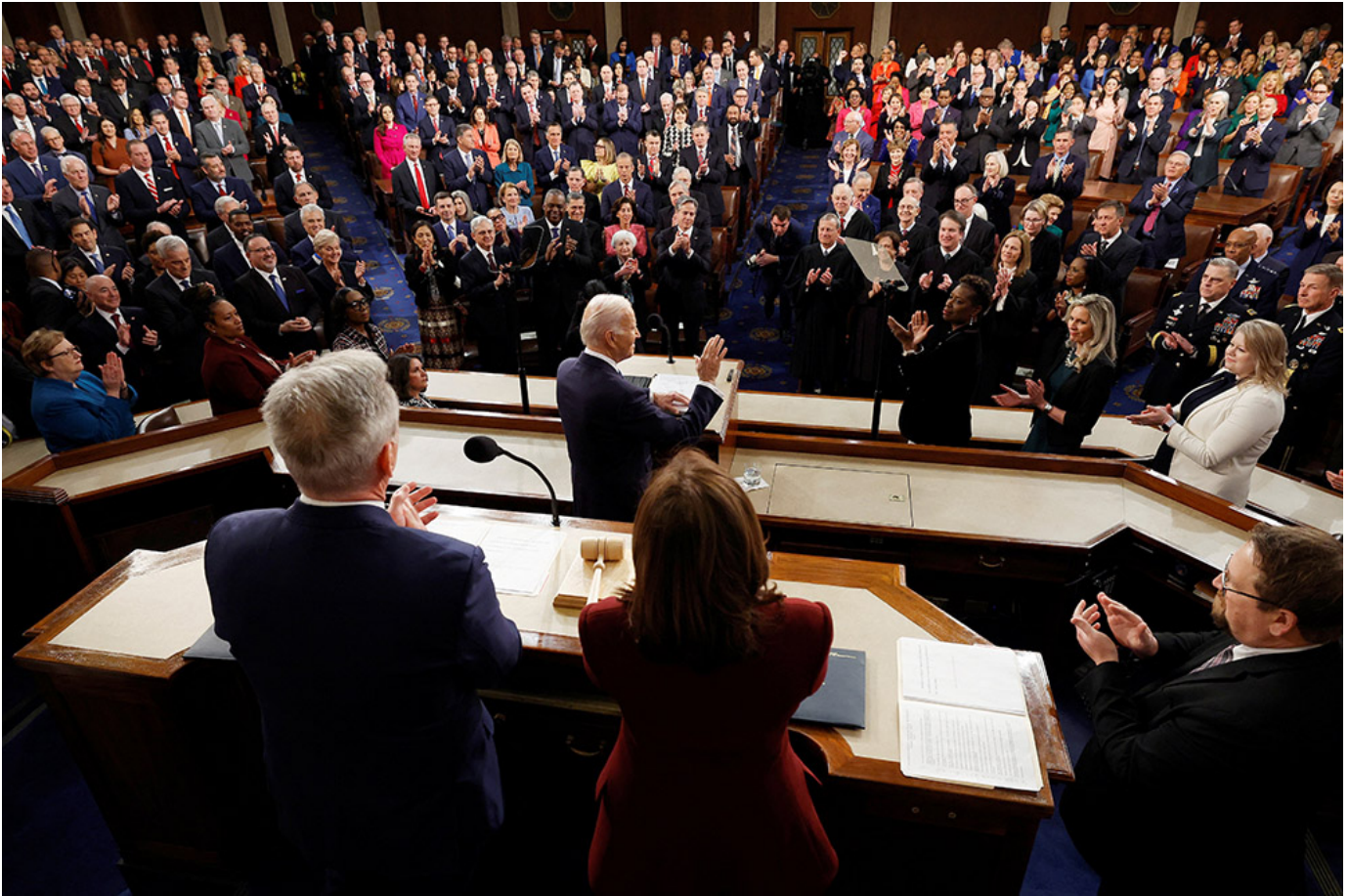
We talked about how each immigrating culture became more and more American. We showed them how America became bigger and better and stronger with every new tide of people who brought great new talents to the building of our cities. When we needed more people to run the railroads, others to lay the tracks, some to do the steel work in a country full of new high-rise buildings, many to harvest the fruit and vegetables even now, whole communities to do our day labor and personal services, the settled and the quiet to keep the neighborhoods peaceful and family-centered. But not now. Not in the face of rolling waves of the hungry and the poor from everywhere at once.

The problem is that maybe we forgot to tell them the mistakes we made as the country grew with people from other lands. History, we have discovered, is a truth we apparently do not want the present population to know. We clearly do not want to confess our prejudices and how it hurts the prejudicial as well as the prejudiced.

No matter how good confession is for the soul.

We could tell them the things we had to learn from peoples outside our own cultures and the time it took for us to recognize the beauty of the mixture and the veritable inhumanity that could weaken people who chose to live without it.

And more. Now they are hearing about the [books that are coming off the shelves](#) of school libraries in the very states we'd all sworn to keep free. Free to assemble, free to speak, free to think different thoughts than the people around us. Free to recognize the struggles and the courage it takes to grow up in a democracy, to support it and protect it and learn from it in all the accents around us.



President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Feb. 7. (OSV News/Kevin Dietsch, pool via Reuters)

We learned that Congress — like Christianity — was a place where we had been meant to work together for the sake of the entire country rather than marginalize those who weren't in our private ascendancy. And we were proud of it.

So here's the question: In the light of laws being written to keep hungry immigrants out, what has happened to the Christian part of us?

And the answer, it seems, is a simple one. What happened to us is what we wanted to have happen to us:

We got the enemies we wanted.

We got the legislators we didn't want.

We got an insurrection at the Capitol, a split Congress, and mockers at the State of the Union address.

Are we really wondering how we've gotten so judgmental, so closed to so many?

Jesus, Mary and Joseph — Scripture is clear — went down into Egypt to live during the famine. To find food. To get protection. To thrive.

And we? What?

Are we trying to take care of one another? Or not? Have we lost interest in being our best, in being a country of heart?

Or has the United States simply become a collection of isolates?

From where I stand, if we're at a turning point in the United States, maybe before we pass any laws about it, we might do better to think it over. It might be better if we all sat down together and decided which motto sounds most like what we thought we were: "Everybody for themselves" or "That all may be one," as in "[E pluribus unum.](#)"

Just wondering.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 17-30, 2023** print issue under the headline: That we all may be ... what? 'E pluribus unum' is hard to find today.