

## A PATH FORWARD

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AMERICAN?

BY STEVEN P. DINKIN

As our country celebrates Independence Day this weekend, I'm having a surprisingly hard time answering what should be a very simple question: What does it mean to be an American?

When Grinnell College posed this same question as part of a national poll in 2018, more than 85 percent of respondents agreed that it is very important for "real Americans" to possess these two traits: a belief in treating people equally and a willingness to take personal responsibility for their actions. Nearly as many agreed that it is very important for "real Americans" to accept people with different racial or religious backgrounds.

This certainly makes it sound as though our country is inclusive and accepting of all, doesn't it?

Not to ruin the mood, but the same poll found that a substantial minority of

Americans subscribe to a much narrower view of what it means to be "Made in America." "Real Americans" are born here (24 percent), are Christian (23 percent) and are able to speak English (44 percent).

Once upon a time, there was talk of American exceptionalism, a term that was coined by Joseph Stalin as the U.S. escaped the global rise of socialism and Marxism. It implies that our country is unique and special — a model for the rest of the world. Our supposed exceptionalism has been touted for decades by politicians from both parties.

If we did indeed treat each other equally, regardless of race or religion — as the Grinnell College poll would have us believe — America might be able to legitimately claim to be exceptional, at least on one very important front. Something like that could awaken my patriotic spirit.

But alas, right now,

America is feeling rather unexceptional.

New York Times columnist David Brooks says we are facing multiple epic crises all at once. We are losing the fight against COVID-19, because in Brooks' words, "We just got tired, so we're giving up." Then there's structural racism: Black Americans continue to bear unimaginable burdens that White Americans are just beginning to understand. And, Brooks says, our country could be on the verge of a prolonged economic depression, with state and household budgets in meltdown, businesses failing and a continuing health emergency that will stymie economic activity.

Back in January, which seems like a thousand years ago, I fretted about incivility in our society. As Exhibit A, I pointed to what happened immediately following the State of the Union address. In the current scheme of

things, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's petulant gesture — ripping up a copy of President's Donald Trump speech — seems rather quaint.

So does the question at hand: What does it mean to be an American? Putting the current crises aside, I must admit that I feel a deep perplexity.

I neither love nor hate this country. I'm not American-centric. Rather, I see our country as part of a global society.

So maybe it's difficult for me to say what it means to be an American because it implies that we are somehow different from every other country — somehow exceptional. I have never subscribed to this belief.

Pew Research Center just released a report that shows we are deeply unhappy. About 7 in 10 Americans (71 percent) say they feel angry about the state of the country these days, while roughly two-thirds (66

percent) say they feel fearful. Public satisfaction about how things are progressing plummeted from 31 percent in April — during the early weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak — to 12 percent today. Just 17 percent of Americans say they feel proud when thinking about the state of the country.

About half of the public (48 percent) say life will be worse for future generations than it is today. The remainder is equally split in their views — one-quarter saying life will be better and a similar share saying it will be about the same. Those feelings are shared across all major demographic and political groups.

While it hardly feels like the right time to wave the American flag, there is something to cheer: the return of Major League Baseball in just a few weeks.

With the start of a new season — albeit a shortened one — the promise of a World Series win by my Milwaukee

Brewers is still very real.

This Independence Day can be a start of another sort. We can begin to reverse course — but first, America needs to heal.

This means talking and listening to each other, and talking and listening some more — not to achieve consensus but to build empathy and create understanding. It's hard work, with big returns: In emerging from this crisis, our country will truly be exceptional.

Then, future generations will have no trouble explaining what it means to be an American.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based organization working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit [nrcconline.com](http://nrcconline.com)

## VENUES

FROM B1  
ego County, which reached 15,696 on Thursday.

Events business owners don't expect life to return to normal anytime soon. They worry the pandemic could cost them their business.

Like bars and restaurants, party businesses thrive off of bringing people together to socialize.

Crystal Palace, an event venue near El Cerrito, has capacity for 450 people. The hall serves as a one-stop shop, providing decoration services and help booking photographers, caterers and DJs.

The hall has been closed since March.

"It doesn't look like we can open anytime soon," said Roger Chan, VP of Crystal Palace in an email Wednesday. "It is frustrating, but what else can we do? ... Clients are not comfortable hosting events, and we are not ready to do so for the safety of our staff."

He said most events for this year have been postponed to 2021, but his family still has to pay rent and other expenses. The business received payroll assistance from the government but was recently denied a loan.

"It has cost our family more than high financial loss; it's our livelihood," Chan said. "All of the family members are involved in the business one way or another."

The county's plan for reopening follows the state's



Robert Diaz works with customer Christine Hurst at his store, La Casa de Las Piñatas, in City Heights.

JOHN GASTALDO

Resilience Roadmap, which has four "stages" for opening society. Each stage identifies certain businesses and activities that are allowed to resume if certain conditions are met.

The state's Stage 3 allows for weddings, and Stage 4 includes lifting the stay-at-home order and reopening concerts and convention centers.

San Diego County is in

Stage 2, with approval to allow a select number of businesses from Stage 3 to reopen. Those include nail salons, fitness facilities and outdoor religious services.

Events business owners, especially venue operators, say it's unclear what stage applies to their industry.

The family-owned Boulevard Hall in City Heights has been closed since March, said Kenneth Ho, who works

as its director with his family. He has been in touch with other venue owners in San Diego and said it feels as if venues are in "a gray area."

"A lot of us don't quite understand what exactly are the parameters," said Ho.

Much of the focus has been on how to reopen restaurants and retail shops, he said, but the events industry is not widely understood or talked about.

Owners of venues and other events businesses say they lack proper direction from officials, he said.

Ho said events businesses all operate differently. While some can pivot to working smaller events — such as photographers shooting private sessions or DJs playing music at bars — venues rely on hosting big events.

County officials on

Wednesday said venues fall under Stage 4 and are not currently permitted to operate.

Ho said his concern is being able to book future events. Events for November through February 2021 would have been booked during the time that his venue was closed, he said, which means there could be difficult months ahead.

Juan Lira, owner of Sonlatino Professional DJs, recently had to move his DJ equipment from a storage center in Otay Mesa into his garage to cut expenses. A sparkly silver disco ball, speakers, lights, smoke machines and other equipment are stacked up next to his 1950 Plymouth.

Playing music at parties went from being a hobby to a 20-year career and a company Lira built with his wife, Joanna Lira. Sonlatino typically works large family parties, quinceañeras and weddings, Juan Lira said, which typically have a guest list of 100 or more people.

He said his company was booked out for the remainder of the year before COVID-19 hit; now many of those events have been postponed. Lira estimates he has lost about \$65,000.

Lira said he's had to dip into the family's savings to pay for rent, insurance and other household bills.

"If this continues a couple of more months, then I don't know what is going to happen," he said.

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## DISTRICT

FROM B1  
tenants were charged rent for the two months they could not access their art studios.

Moore, who plans to relocate her 7 Stitches custom jewelry shop to an as-yet-unknown location, is not the only artist leaving the district.

Judith Greer Essex leased about 1,200 square feet in the Arts District for nearly a dozen years.

The founder of the nonprofit Expressive Arts Institute vacated her studio this spring, even though she signed a three-year lease extension in January. Essex said she could not afford to pay rent on property she could no longer occupy.

"I'm kind of over the barrel as a small business owner," she said. "Once COVID hit, we were no longer generating income. Our business depends on meeting people face to face. They said they would postpone our rent, but that doesn't really help."

Essex was forced to break the lease and set up the Institute's operations online from her South Park residence, although she hopes to find new rental space later this year.

Meanwhile, the NTC Foundation is seeking more than \$100,000 from the Expressive Arts Institute — rent it would have collected over the next three years. The demand has flummoxed Essex, whose small nonprofit arts center has nowhere near that much cash.

"We always thought, 'What the hell? This property doesn't belong to the NTC Foundation,'" she said. "They have proven their avarice and their shadiness and what really is a lack of ethics for being the steward and guardian of property that belongs to the city of San Diego."



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T

Ronald Slayen works at his shop on Wednesday. Slayen said he feels that because he has been outspoken against the landlord, his lease is not being renewed.

## Assets exceed \$44 million

In the early 1920s, not long after winning World War I, the U.S. government began construction of a new military base on the north shore of San Diego Bay. It was christened the Naval Training Center.

For more than seven decades, the training installation prepared thousands of sailors for war, steered billions of dollars into the regional economy and cemented San Diego's reputation as a proud military town.

But the 360-acre Navy base just west of Lindbergh Field was targeted for closure in 1993 amid a national Department of Defense restructuring. The land and hundreds of historic buildings — many in disrepair — were turned over to the city of San Diego.

In 1999, city officials awarded rights to redevelop the property to The Rocky McMillin Co., a longtime San Diego homebuilder that promised to transform the former military base into a huge residential, business and entertainment destination.

Two decades later the dream has largely been fulfilled, and at limited cost to taxpayers.

Private homes in what is now called Liberty Station routinely sell for more than \$1 million, and the community is home to some of the most popular brands in San Diego, including the Stone Brewing Co., Corvette Diner and the Rock Church.

The 80-acre Arts District was set aside as a cultural hub within the larger Liberty Station community, a place where artists of all stripes could congregate and create, and visitors could shop, mingle, take classes and attend lectures or demonstrations.

Management of the Arts District, which remains publicly owned, was awarded to the NTC Foundation, a nonprofit created by a vote of the City Council. Its charitable mission was to renovate and preserve dozens of the historic buildings and to promote community arts.

But in recent years, tenants have questioned the foundation's motives.

Ellen Shore served in

the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War under the WAVES program — women accepted for volunteer emergency service. Now she produces acrylic mixed-media paintings in a 130-square-foot studio she leases at Liberty Station for \$655 per month.

"I've been paying full rent, and I haven't skipped a payment," Shore said. "I asked several times for any help — half, anything — and it's always no."

Shorey, who paints alongside her therapy dog "Bobby," said she is surprised that city officials do not do more to make sure the foundation is meeting its charitable mission to promote and provide space for local artists.

"I would think the city would want this to be a destination for artists," she said. "It makes a nice community."

The NTC Foundation's financial records show revenue and assets increasing significantly in recent years.

In its 2016 federal tax filing, for example, the foundation reported \$3 million in revenue and \$40 million in

total assets.

By 2018, the tax-exempt organization's annual revenue had climbed to \$4.1 million and total assets were listed at \$44.3 million — increases of 37 percent and 11 percent, respectively — the California Attorney General's Office reported.

## 'Just pay it'

Michele Goodwin is another painter who ran a studio and gallery in the Arts District. She had just extended her lease by another year when the foundation closed the property in response to COVID-19.

Despite the closure, the landlord refused to offer any discount on rent, Goodwin said. When she couldn't pay, the foundation billed her more than \$9,000 — the full balance of the lease.

"They said due to COVID they were unable to rent the space, so I was liable to pay them for that whole year's rent," she said. "But the place rented immediately, and then for some reason they showed gratitude and charged me for three months."

Goodwin, who now runs her studio out of her home in Point Loma, said she paid the foundation nearly \$3,000 to break her lease — and they kept her nearly \$800 security deposit.

"I had an attorney tell me to just pay it and run," she said. "I didn't want any dings on my credit."

Ronald Slayen is a French marquetry artist who has been at odds with his landlord since soon after he signed his first lease in 2012.

Slayen, who has complained publicly that the NTC Foundation is too close to McMillin and refuses to allow tenants to attend board meetings or see financial records, was told last month that his lease would not be extended once it expires Sept. 30.

"It was supposed to be a separate unit from the for-profit McMillin empire, but it is in fact not," he said.

Before running the foundation, Johnson was a McMillin executive. Another longtime McMillin executive, Joe Haeussler, is an officer of the nonprofit Liberty Station Community Association, which collects fees from Arts District tenants for maintenance and other costs.

Slayen also has raised questions about the foundation's support for plans to convert the nearby North Chapel to a commercial events venue — a proposal that led to two Catholic congregations no longer being permitted to worship inside the Mediterranean-style church.

The marquetry artist said he has no doubt he is being punished for speaking up against the foundation and criticizing plans to commercialize the church.

"The fact that they would go after me is so clear-cut retribution," Slayen said. "If the cost of saving the North Chapel is losing my lease, then that is well worth it."

The NTC Foundation has no role in managing the North Chapel. It was part of a master leasehold that McMillin sold in 2018. But the foundation CEO lent her name to a press release issued by the new landlord in December, when it announced the planned renovations.

"We have long wanted to see increased use of this building, and we're pleased with this plan for adaptive reuse," Johnson said.

Last year, the NTC Foundation was awarded a \$9 million state grant to help restore a building to help across Roosevelt Road from the North Chapel, where it expects to open a performing arts center.

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