

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

Opinion: We need to put our country before ourselves.  
Do we have the courage to do that?



Riot shields are stacked at the ready as National Guard troops reinforce the security zone on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2021, before President-elect Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president on Wednesday. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite) (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

By MALIN BURNHAM

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Burnham is a philanthropist who founded the Burnham Center for Community Advancement. He lives in Point Loma.

The time has come for Americans to set aside our differences before they tear us apart and come together to tackle the real problems we face.

For 50 years, I have dedicated my life to philanthropy in my home city of San Diego. For the last 20 years, I have extended that commitment to Tijuana, and to bringing these two great cities together. Along the way I have developed a philosophy I call “Community Before Self.” Five years ago, I wrote a book on the subject.

Through these efforts, I have learned that pursuit of the common good is a galvanizing process. It calls people to rise above their differences — and we Americans are going to have our differences — and find a place of amity where we can work together to improve society.

Calling citizens to take up common cause was a challenge in San Diego County, home to a diverse community 3.3 million strong. Now, imagine getting San Diego and Tijuana to work together: over 5 million citizens across two countries, languages and cultures. Our cross-border collaborations model what sustained, pragmatic, collective action can do.

Today, the United States is as divided as it has been in 150 years, split into two antagonistic camps that refuse to talk to one another, or even to accept the other as legitimate. Lifelong friendships have been broken, the First Amendment has been tattered, truth is under assault, and “cancel culture” is in the ascendant. As a famous American said during a similar time, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” It did not.

We cannot sustain this situation any longer. We need to find our way back to civility — not for the shallow purpose of making nice, but because America has challenges, and we need each other to solve them.

As I have seen time and again in San Diego and with our neighbors across the border, “Community Before Self” works. Common cause is possible and effective, if we sublimate our individual interests and prejudices and come together to serve the larger good.

After all, what is America but the great historic experiment in creating a nation-as-community, populated by people of all types, all working towards the dream of a greater good? This country, at its greatest, has accepted millions of immigrants from around the world, who built the America we all treasure. This philosophy of collective work — call it “Country Before Self” — defines what it means to be an American. It was famously articulated by John F. Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address.

The United States became the most successful country in history, the leader of the free world, because of this higher calling. We have held that title for a long time. But the world is changing faster than ever, and if we continue to squabble among ourselves, other nations — none with our best interests at heart — are ready to take our place.

As we learned in San Diego and Tijuana, real problems will not be solved by government. Rather, change begins as a grassroots movement — it begins with us ... and “Community Before Self” leads to “Country Before Self.”

We need to leave judgment and cancel culture behind and come together with empathy and curiosity. This means finding the courage to ask that neighbor with the political sign you detest what they believe and why — and genuinely taking in their answers, not to judge if they are right or wrong but to understand the world from a new perspective. It means refriending people you have dropped in recent years because of overheated rhetoric, and “uncanceling” the victims of our cultural wars. Most of all, it means reaching out to people you disagree with and starting conversations about the problems you might tackle together.

Do we have the courage to do that? To put aside our differences for a greater cause, to put “Country Before Self”? Our republic depends upon it.

How will you put country before self? We are collecting stories to inspire the nation. Please submit yours to [countrybeforeself.org](http://countrybeforeself.org)