

**Remarks by Patrick Butler
Accepting The Media Institute's
2024 American Horizon Award
October 29, 2024**

Thank you, Judy. To be introduced by the legendary Judy Woodruff, and especially in this most generous way, is honor enough for me, and I am tempted to sit down right now and simply savor her very kind words. To be in the company of two of my heroes, Floyd Abrams and Dick Wiley, in receiving awards from The Media Institute compounds the honor. And to have all this fuss made over me in the presence of my family very nearly leaves me speechless. But, this being Washington, not quite.

When I was 11 years old, living in the tiny community of Kimball, Tennessee, my parents let me stay home from school and watch the inauguration of President Kennedy and hear his stirring call to “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” That moment was the beginning of my passion to serve my country in whatever way I could.

Fourteen years later, I was a presidential speechwriter myself, and I became friends with Ted Sorensen, who had helped President Kennedy craft his inaugural address. When I had occasion to ask how much of that speech was his, and how much was the President's, Ted diplomatically replied: “Ask not.”

As we approach the 250th anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence, my friends in public media are inaugurating a campaign to remind us all of our first inspiration to become good citizens and encouraging us to ask again what we can do for our country. This initiative in civic leadership – encompassing programming, education, and community outreach – is exactly what we've come to expect of public media, which I consider a treasure beyond price.

Saint Judy Woodruff has been on the road the past few years searching for the ties that bind us as a people in this contentious era – and she is finding them. Ken Burns will bring a 12-hour history of the American Revolution to public television next year, and he will remind us that even on the fundamental question of independence, colonial Americans were deeply divided, and yet we rallied to a cause that changed the world.

Such context is immensely useful to us as we navigate our own sea of troubles two and a half centuries later. At their best, media can help us better understand the perennial competition of ideas and interests, and the motivations of those with whom we disagree, and this understanding is essential to our exercise of self-government.

It is no coincidence that *public* media consistently rank among the most trusted institutions in America, because it is our mission to reflect the real America – its history, its heartland, its complexity, its true character – in all that we do. In addition to the Woodruffs and the Burnses and others familiar to the national audience, 20,000 people working in hundreds of local public media stations across our country are profoundly committed to this mission.

And the closer we get to the people who actually make America work, the more credible we are to them, and the more confident we all can be that the good sense and good will of the American people are equal to any challenge we may face as a nation.

Some of us in this room can remember the calamitous year of 1968, when our country was so beset by war and protests, assassinations and riots, tanks in our streets and hostility in our hearts, we feared that America was falling apart, that the center would not hold.

And yet it did, because we the people decided that it must, that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” We decided that if we want self-government to work, we have to govern ourselves, not only at the polling place but in our personal conduct toward one another.

And if we want America to work, we have to make it work ourselves, both by doing our civic duty on Election Day and by investing our own talents – perhaps modest in themselves but mighty in their multitudes and immortal in their influence – in the success of our communities and the progress of our country.

Teaching a child, caring for the sick, rescuing those in peril, comforting those in need, doing all the things good people do for one another every day in America without reward or recognition – such work is sacred, for as both the Talmud and the Quran tell us: “Who saves one life saves the world entire.”

In anxious and corrosive times like these, it may seem daunting or even foolhardy to think that we can find national reconciliation in these countless deeds of quiet grace. But I believe with Winston Churchill that “Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing, after exhausting all the alternatives.”

And so, I accept this award with deep gratitude and with an abiding faith that the American Horizon is not only bright but brilliant if we the people will make it so.

As President Kennedy concluded on that cold, snowy day in Washington so long ago: “Let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”