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More than any other nation, America is characterized by its diversity. Differing ethnicities, ideologies, and religious beliefs have made our nation less a "melting pot" than a complex mosaic, in that the myriad groups within our society retain their core individuality even as they interact and unite under one flag. This distinctive national character clearly is not a product of relentless homogenization – rather, we owe it to the essential American civic value of tolerance.

For many Americans, the idea of tolerance brings to mind our Constitution's First Amendment, which guarantees the "free exercise" of religion. But while the First Amendment is the most well-known statement of our nation's commitment to tolerance, George Washington expressed a similar spirit even before the Bill of Rights was ratified, in a letter to the Jewish congregation at Newport, Rhode Island. At the time of Washington's visit to Rhode Island in 1790, the Newport Jews had yet to attain full civil and religious equality, and their leader expressed his hope that they would do so under the new national government. In his written response to the congregation, Washington definitively established a precedent of tolerance and respect by declaring that the American government would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance"; the letter was the first document by an American national leader to spell out religious tolerance so explicitly, and its significance has endured from 1790 to today.

The issue of religious tolerance again came to a head in the presidential campaign of 1960, as it became apparent that many Protestants were leery of electing John F. Kennedy, a Catholic. To allay fears that the Pope would influence his decisions as president, Kennedy delivered a landmark speech in which he avowed his belief in the absolute separation of church and state. Even more significantly, however, he also declared his belief in an America where tolerance would ultimately prevail – where no one would be denied public office on the basis of his or her faith. As a presidential candidate, Kennedy never tried to hide his Catholicism, nor did he become discouraged by the widespread public skepticism it engendered. Instead, he stood for tolerance and reminded Americans that our nation was founded on the principle of equal treatment for all people, regardless of their spiritual beliefs.

As we now find ourselves in the midst of a global war on terror, the need for religious and ethnic tolerance is as vital as ever. The recent presidential campaign, in particular, highlighted the continuing relevancy of this issue – for example, on NBC's "Meet the Press," while rebuking those who spread the rumor that Barack Obama is Muslim, former secretary of state Colin Powell pointed out that "...the really right answer is, 'What if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?' The answer is no, that's not America." Too often, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments are confused with anti-terrorism, and unless we, the American people, renew our commitment to tolerance, we risk falling down a slippery slope of hatred and division. In a nation of such diversity, peace and justice cannot exist – nor can we promote these ideals abroad – without the values of tolerance and respect.

Like other civic values, tolerance and respect begin with the individual. In my own life, I have Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, agnostic, and atheist friends, and I make an effort to learn about their beliefs so that I can better understand – and better appreciate – our differences. When I witness intolerant behavior, at school or anywhere else, I speak out against it. Additionally, I am a member of a local church that is known for being tolerant of other religious traditions; as a youth elder, I fully support my church's sharing its building with a Jewish congregation, as well as my church's participation in interfaith dialogues. Initiatives such as these lend practical meaning to the principles expressed in the Bill of Rights and Washington's letter.

As Americans, we constantly strive for "a more perfect union." The achievement of this overarching goal, however, has always been tied to our ability to recognize diversity as one of our nation's great strengths. If our national motto of "E Pluribus Unum" – "From Many, One" – is to ring forever true, we must ensure that tolerance and respect continue to define the American way of life.