

# Conrad Graham for the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site – The Promise We Inherit: America at 250 and What It Means Today

In 1776, the idea that a group of colonies could form a new nation built on self-government was a radical, novel concept. Nearly 250 years later, the United States has grown into something far larger and more complex than the founders could have imagined. Anniversaries like this are not only moments to celebrate the past, but opportunities to reflect on how the nation has changed and what its ideals mean today. Our nation proves to be continually shaped by the new boundaries we push toward every day; our constant, ever-changing redefinition of freedom, equality, peace, and even conflict reveals the complexity of the American experiment. The United States has never been a finished project. Instead, it has been an ongoing effort to interpret and reinterpret the principles first written in 1776, with each generation inheriting both the achievements and the unfinished work of the one before it. Two and a half centuries later, the anniversary invites Americans not only to look back at the founding of the nation, but also to consider how those founding ideas have survived, evolved, and sometimes been challenged. The meaning of freedom, representation, and opportunity has never remained fixed. Rather, it has expanded through debate, struggle, compromise, and progress. This constant process of redefinition is what has allowed the country to endure for so long. The 250th anniversary, therefore, represents more than a celebration of longevity; it serves as a reminder that the nation's identity has always been shaped by the people who live within it, and that the responsibility for its future continues to pass from generation to generation.

For young Americans, the 250th anniversary carries a slightly different meaning than it might for earlier generations. While the founding of the country exists for us mostly in textbooks and historical memory, the responsibility of its future is something we are actively stepping into. Every generation inherits an America that is unfinished, shaped by the decisions, successes, and failures of those who came before. Young people today are growing up in a nation that continues to wrestle with questions of equality, representation, opportunity, and unity; many of the same questions that have existed since the country's earliest days. At the same time, American youth today are often more politically and socially aware than generations before them, shaped by unprecedented access to information and the immediacy of modern communication. Through education, media, and digital connections, young people are exposed daily to discussions about public policy, civil rights, environmental stewardship, and the role of government in society. This environment has fostered a generation that is not only informed but often eager to engage with the civic life of the nation. Many young Americans tend to express views that emphasize continued progress; progress not simply as a political label, but as a belief that the nation should keep moving forward, refining and expanding the principles it was founded upon. In this sense, being "progressive" reflects a broader historical pattern in the United States: the idea that the country is constantly developing, improving, and redefining itself. The ideals written in 1776 were never meant to be perfectly realized in a single moment; rather, they created a framework through which each generation could participate in shaping the country's direction. For American youth, the 250th anniversary serves as both a reflection on the past and a reminder that the responsibility for carrying those ideals forward will increasingly belong to us. As the nation approaches this milestone, younger generations are not simply observers of history; they are participants in the continuing evolution of the American experiment.

While national milestones often dominate historical conversations, the strength of American democracy has always depended just as much on local and regional communities. Across the country, young people are becoming increasingly involved in civic life at the level where democracy is most immediate and tangible. Schools, community organizations, museums, and historic sites serve as important entry points for younger generations to engage with the traditions and responsibilities that define American citizenship. Through volunteer work, community discussions, preservation initiatives, and educational programs, many young people begin to understand that the story of the United States is not something distant or abstract; it is something that unfolds in the communities where they live. Places such as the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site play an important role in this connection between history and participation. By preserving the legacy of past leadership and presenting it within a local context, institutions like this remind visitors that national history is built from countless local experiences and contributions. For many young Americans, visiting historic sites or participating in community-based initiatives becomes one of the first meaningful encounters with the idea that civic responsibility is not reserved for elected officials alone. Instead, it belongs to every citizen who takes an interest in their community and the direction of the country. These experiences help bridge the gap between past and present, demonstrating that the ideals being commemorated during the nation's 250th anniversary remain active and relevant through the actions of individuals in their own communities.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary in 2026, the milestone arrives during a moment of genuine tension in the nation's political life. The American system has always relied on a delicate balance between institutions, public trust, and the shared belief that

democratic norms must be protected even when they are inconvenient. In recent years, however, many Americans, particularly younger ones, have watched with concern as decisions and rhetoric from national leadership have tested those norms and, at times, threatened to move the country backward rather than forward. For many young people, these debates are not abstract political disagreements but realities that shape everyday life. As an LGBTQ+ student who grew up in neighborhoods of Indianapolis where economic hardship is a familiar part of daily life, and in a family that has relied on programs such as SNAP and Medicaid, the direction of national policy is not something distant or theoretical. Policies surrounding civil rights, social safety nets, and public opportunity affect whether many young Americans feel protected, supported, and able to participate fully in the life of the country. Efforts that challenge democratic practices, weaken institutional guardrails, or place uncertainty around protections and programs that millions depend on raise difficult questions about the direction of the country at a moment that should otherwise be one of reflection and unity; yet history offers an important perspective. The United States has faced moments before when progress appeared uncertain or when the nation seemed to drift away from its highest ideals. In many of those moments, the response came not only from political leaders but from citizens themselves; people who insisted that the country continue striving toward greater liberty, equality, and accountability. For young Americans observing the present moment, the lesson is not one of cynicism but of responsibility. The anniversary in 2026 reminds us that democracy is not sustained automatically; it depends on the willingness of each generation to defend its principles and to push the nation forward rather than allowing it to slide backward. If the first 250 years of the American experiment have shown anything, it is that progress has always required participation, vigilance, and the belief that the country can still become closer to the ideals it set for itself in 1776.

Two hundred and fifty years after its founding, the United States remains what it has always been: an unfinished project shaped by the people who choose to participate in it. This year offers a moment not only to honor the past, but to recognize that the principles written in 1776 were never meant to remain fixed in time. They were meant to be interpreted, challenged, and strengthened by each new generation. For young Americans today, that responsibility is becoming increasingly real. The debates, challenges, and progress of the present moment will help determine what the country looks like for decades to come. While the path forward may not always be clear or easy, the enduring strength of the American experiment lies in the willingness of its citizens to keep striving toward a more just, more inclusive, and more unified nation. As the country reflects on its first 250 years, the most meaningful tribute to its founding ideals will not be found in celebration alone, but in the continued effort to ensure that the next 250 years move the nation closer to the promises it first set out to fulfill.