

States Dinner

Keynote from Carly Fiorina

A Common Cause to All: A Convening of States Tuesday,
March 19, 2024

Thank you, Senator Locke, for that most gracious introduction. And before we let the Senator exit the stage, today is a very special day for her. Won't you join me in singing Happy Birthday to Senator Locke?

You know, it was this work, the work we do together to plan for and commemorate our nation's semiquincentennial, that brought Senator Locke and me together. That brought Chief Adkins and me together, that brought Terry Austin and me together. That brought me together with so many of you that I had not had the privilege to work with before.

The delight that both Senator Locke and I take in our lucky and, to some perhaps, unlikely friendship, is a reminder of the power of the work we are gathered here to advance. Brought together by common cause and worthy purpose, we are all forging new friendships and alliances. We are all discovering how much we agree on, how much we share, how much we can leverage and draw upon each other's different experiences and perspectives and become stronger and better in the process. This amazing group of leaders, all the marvelous speakers you have heard from, all the plans and programs that you have shared, demonstrate that since we gathered here one year ago, a great many friendships and alliances have been formed and much progress has been made.

I would like to recognize all the individuals here who lead and serve on state and local 250 Planning Commissions. Please stand. Thank you. I would also like to recognize those of you who are here leading and representing our important historic homes, museums, institutions that further civic engagement, and those that protect and preserve our art, culture, and history. Please stand. Let us thank all these wonderful individuals for their commitment, their passion, their willingness to collaborate. You have done great work in the past year and will do great work together in the coming years.

Last year as we gathered for the first time, we spoke about our unique opportunity and responsibility to come together in every state and across the nation. We spoke about the need to tell the whole story of our complex history — not to divide, but rather to unite in a shared understanding of how we came to be. We said that only in telling our entire history can our history belong to everyone. And only when we understand how our history belongs to us all, can we each play our part in helping to form a more perfect union. We said we must celebrate together the intoxicating idea of freedom and the unique promise of this nation. And we said this is not simply about star-spangled events, but more fundamentally about making a real impact, making a real difference that is substantial and lasting. Because as Senator Locke frequently and eloquently reminds us: this semiquincentennial and all the events in 2024, 2025 and 2026 are not just about our past. They are also about our present and our future.

Let us be clear: our common cause, our worthy purpose, is to make a substantial, lasting impact on our present as well as on our future. Our common cause and our worthy purpose are to unite Americans in shared understanding of who we are, how we came to be a nation, and in our commitment to our role as American citizens.

To make such a substantial, lasting impact, we must be clear-eyed about the circumstances in which we operate. We also must be ambitious in, and committed to, the character of our work. Tonight, I want to speak about both our circumstances and our character.

We are a divided, anxious nation. Our discourse is too often crude and toxic. To many Americans, our differences are more important than the threads that bind us together. Almost 50% of Americans say that living in a democracy does not matter.

Over 70% of Americans cannot name more than a single branch of government. The vast majority do not know the significance of 2026 or what relevance the Declaration of Independence, or even the Constitution, has in their lives. As November elections approach, our divisions will become more inflamed. And these tensions will continue long past this election and be carried forward into future elections. Meanwhile, bad actors the world over, and within our country as well, will take advantage of our ignorance and seize every opportunity to sow more discord.

Technology makes their job easy.

I say all this not to bring us down. But I have learned that the only way to get to where you want to go is first to understand where you are. So let us acknowledge where we are.

In a nation defined only by a set of documents, guiding principles, founding ideals and a system of government, Americans no longer know why we are a nation. We no longer know what binds us together. We do not know who we are or where we come from.

To change this current reality for our nation is our opportunity. This is our legacy. This is our common cause and our worthy purpose.

To succeed at such an ambitious undertaking will require steadfast character, defined both by what we do and how we do it. So let us speak of the character of our work together.

What must we do?

Whenever our families gather for a special occasion, the same thing always happens. After we share and laugh and gossip about the present, or dream and speculate about the future, we inevitably begin to tell stories of our families' past. We tell the stories of those who came before us and what their lives mean to us. Why do we do this? Because we realize at our core, that unless we know who and where we come from, we do not know who we are. And when we do not know who we are, we are more afraid to face our future. What is true of a person, is true of a family, is true of a community, and is true of our nation.

We do not know who we are, so we are more afraid of our future. So first, before we celebrate, before we commemorate, we must educate. We must educate our fellow Americans using all the resources at our disposal: all our great museums, historic and civic institutions; our partners in education; our communities and their leaders; the tools of technology. Our education must be accessible. It must be authentic and complete. It must draw people in.

Here in Virginia, our mobile museum will travel to every middle school in the Commonwealth. We are coordinating with the Secretary of Education so that lesson plans and testing requirements across the Commonwealth incorporate the great experience of a visit to the mobile museum. Every one of our historic sites, museums, and parks, as well as all members of the Governor's Cabinet, are working on educational programs to capitalize on the public's increasing attention as our semiquincentennial approaches. Our local 250 Planning Commissions are focused on the presentation of their local history to the community.

The Teacher Institute here at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation continues to build out its educational curriculum. We collaborate with many others to bring the best to history.org, the powerful domain we own and govern. In partnership with iCivics, we are creating engaging games to teach history and civics. Everyone at Colonial Williamsburg, from the Board of Trustees to all our employees in the Historic Area, have spent countless hours thinking about how to make a visit here not just interesting and enjoyable, but revelatory and thought-provoking.

These are but a few examples of the priority we place on our first goal of education. No matter who we are, or where we are, all of us gathered here tonight believe education is the cornerstone of our semiquincentennial work. Whenever you encounter a member of your community with your work, what do you want them to learn about themselves and our nation? When the semiquincentennial is over, we must share a common understanding of the foundational elements and origins of our nation. We must develop a shared appreciation of how this foundation and these beginnings shape our today and our tomorrow.

Second, we must engage. Over the next three years, throughout 2024, 2025 and 2026, we have a unique opportunity to engage with our fellow Americans in a myriad of ways and across every community. One of the great wonders of America is the diversity of human expression that flourishes here. And we should highlight and celebrate all of it. We are welcoming artists of all kinds, musicians, chefs, vintners, distilleries.... We want to include everyone who cares about this nation to participate; to bring the best of their culture, their creativity and ingenuity, their artistry and their craft; to express and reflect for us what this nation and our founding mean.

As another way to deepen our engagement here in Virginia, we have established the Tribal Nations Leadership and the African American Advisory Councils, chaired by Chief Adkins and Senator Locke respectively. I have already learned so much from these leaders and these Councils. Our programming is being shaped and greatly enriched by their guidance.

We must engage with the business community. The most innovative and powerful economy in the world did not happen here by accident. Both private property and intellectual property were enshrined in the Constitution. Our system of government allows for risk-taking and tolerates both failure and success. Our great economy was built from the ground up by tradespeople, innovators, and entrepreneurs. Most businesses are trusted employers to whom countless employees look for guidance and direction. Business can help fund our programming, with both dollars and resources, and actively encourage their teams to participate.

There are now 134 established local planning commissions in Virginia alone. The value of their work is a constant reminder that all the great movements in this country — including the movement towards independence and revolution — have occurred bottoms-up. The progress our country has achieved all started at the grassroots, with community leaders calling for change.

We are the leaders of the semiquincentennial movement: A great movement to reclaim our past so we can better build our future.

And like all great American movements, this one must also be built from the ground up.

A few minutes ago, I asked all those who are building this movement to stand and be recognized. I did so because these are the leaders who are engaged in substantive work with impact far beyond the year 2026. Like historic markers that last for generations, the work these movement leaders are engaged in will extend long after the final fireworks.

What is the goal of this movement? We must inspire Americans to re-commitment. In this country, our system is designed so that citizens are sovereign, not passive or helpless. Let us prepare citizens to take their rightful place as agents of change to form a more perfect union. Imagine in every community and across this nation, that Americans on July 4th, 2026 would raise their right hand, along with our newest citizens being naturalized, and take the oath of citizenship to these United States. The words of this oath are powerful. To take the oath requires an understanding of who we are, how we govern ourselves, and our role as citizens.

To educate. To engage. To inspire to re-commitment. These are lofty, ambitious goals. No one will question whether they are worthy, fitting for such an august and highly accomplished group, or appropriate for our two-hundred and fifty years as a nation that has changed and led the world. But perhaps some here this evening will question whether these goals are attainable.

As I said at the outset, character is defined both by what we do and how we do it. Our ability to achieve these goals has everything to do with how we do our work. A look back at our history should reassure us that when people come together in common cause and worthy purpose, anything is possible. My own personal experience tells me the same.

On any journey of progress and change, people can come apart when the going gets tough and retreat to their more comfortable corners. Or, people can stick together, eyes forward towards the destination. People can lean on, learn from, and leverage the best of each other to achieve their goals and arrive together.

We must share best practices and great ideas so we all get better. We must acknowledge shortfalls so we do not make the same mistakes over again. We must be open with one another, transparent about our intentions and accountable for our actions so that people learn we can be trusted. We must collaborate willingly and not try to hog the ball or take credit, because the success of our movement requires the best contributions from all of us.

We must stay focused on getting the work done. We cannot get distracted by all the disagreements going on around us or goaded into arguing amongst ourselves. We do not need to agree on everything. We just need to agree on the most important thing: the character of our work.

Let us demonstrate the character of America in 2026 in a way that lifts us up, renews our commitment to our nation and each other, and reassures the world that the United States remains the leader of the free world and a beacon for all who cherish freedom.

Let us continue to put aside our partisan differences and our petty quarrels and embrace our different perspectives. Let us show that we have indeed made much progress towards a more perfect union, although more work must always be done. Let us celebrate every American community and all American stories, so there is no doubt that we are all created equal, no doubt that every one of us is endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, and no doubt that each of us deserves the opportunity and the freedom to pursue our own dreams.

Our semiquincentennial movement will re-connect Americans to who we are and where we came from. We will re-engage Americans who do not think our founding ideals or system of government have anything to do with them. We will remind our fellow citizens what it means to be an American. We will re-inspire Americans to take on the great privilege of citizenship.

Together we will continue the great work necessary to form a more perfect union because we will remember how extraordinarily fortunate, we are to be Americans.

This is our common cause. This is our worthy purpose.

Thank you for your commitment to what we do and how we do it, together. Thank you for all the difference you will make until we meet again.