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## We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

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In the midst of a frenzy of partisan accusation and counter-accusation over the debt and economic woes more generally, the civil rights song *We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For* is worth recalling. In this month of the [dedication](#) of the King Memorial in Washington, the song captures the freedom movement's grassroots wisdom often lost in today's focus on famous leaders. Ending segregation was too big a task for the courts, the Kennedy administration, Congress or eloquent civil rights leaders to accomplish on their own. It took the work of everyone.

Today, once again, the nation's challenges call for a politics of constructive action by the broad citizenry, across divisions. Political leaders who struggle to rise above partisan squabbles offer important examples. Higher education also needs to help lead the way.

Instead, the conventional left and right have turned politics into a spectator sport which the citizenry watches from afar, absolved of responsibility, waiting for a great leader to vanquish our enemies and come to our rescue. Conservative groups like the Tea Party and their allies in Congress demonize the president as a "stealth socialist" leading the nation to European-style statism. The left expresses bitter disappointment in what they see as Obama's failure to mount a frontal challenge to corporate misdeeds, and finger-pointing is ubiquitous. Drew Westen's [recent essay](#) in the *New York Times*, "What Happened to Obama?," is a case in point. For Westen, the flaw in Obama's speeches is that they "virtually always lacked one element: the villain who caused the problem."

Certainly we need our leaders, if they are great ones, to step forward with bold plans, but they also need to challenge the citizenry to engage in the work of democracy rather than to search out the villains. The secret of real American democratic leadership is to revive in our times the civic politics found in both parties, rooted in Abraham Lincoln's formulation of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." That's what attracted voters to President Obama's campaign, as he [argued](#) that "all of us have responsibilities, all of us have to step up to the plate."

In these divided and divisive days in our country, this philosophy of civic agency has inspiring exemplars, historical and contemporary, spanning diverse seats at the political table. To cite another example, Elizabeth Kautz, the Republican mayor of Burnsville, Minnesota, a Twin Cities suburb, has gained national recognition for reviving the concept that government's role is to facilitate the public work of the people. She is the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors -- the first suburban mayor to achieve such recognition. Throughout her tenure as mayor, since 1994, Kautz [has argued](#), "I can't solve the problems of Burnsville by myself, but I can bring people together to do the work of the community."

Obama made his campaign a medium for just this message. In Springfield, Ill., on Feb. 10, 2007, announcing his campaign, he [said](#), "This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose." At the top of the campaign web site [was](#) the challenge, "I'm asking you not only to believe in my ability to make change; I'm asking you to believe in yours."

Since the election, some administration initiatives have sought to spark bipartisan civic action in this vein. For instance, [America's Great Outdoors](#), based on the premise that the burden of protecting the nation's natural heritage rests largely with citizens and communities, has brought together tribal leaders, sports enthusiasts, community park groups, foresters, business people, educators, local government officials, conservation groups and others to develop grassroots, cross-partisan solutions. In the [Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement](#) project of the Department of Education and the American Association of Colleges and Universities, college presidents and government officials are developing plans for revitalized citizenship education.

We believe, in fact, that higher education has a special responsibility to step up to the plate in helping create a different kind of politics, of problem solving rather than blaming. After all, it was the graduates of our prestigious universities -- not evildoers from another planet -- who devised financial instruments like derivatives which (inadvertently) led to financial meltdown and economic crisis. Graduates of our colleges of education have pushed for standardized testing as a way to "leave no child behind," often (inadvertently) draining away the civic mission of schools and severing the connections which once made schools centers of civic life and engines of local economic and social development.

Those of us in higher education will need to overcome powerful trends if we are to take leadership in addressing the dysfunctions of American public life. In recent years, "rankings wars" have led to preoccupation with excellence largely defined as an individual asset, owned by students and faculty alike. Education is marketed as a private good rewarded appropriately with high incomes to the cream of the crop. Scholarship is aimed at disciplinary-based questions. While such questions are appropriate, scholars often speak with a more strained voice to broader audiences.

But the nation's challenges call us to renew our public purpose and democratic mission. Our colleges and universities must relearn skills of collaborative, respectful work with citizens outside our doors. And we believe the broad citizenry will respond.

The voter response to Obama's call for us all to step up to the plate suggested that there is growing awareness no one is coming to the rescue. We all are the ones.

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