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Guest opinion: We should do what's best for all Americans

In the wake of the Civil War, a subtle change came in the language we use to define our identity. Prior to the Civil War, we used the phrasing "The United States are," whereas we have used "The United States is" since the cessation of open hostilities in 1865.

This simple change of a grammatical conjunction said that we were, indeed, united.

History has shown that simple questions tend to have complex answers. This simple answer, though, tends to ignore some complex realities.

Are we a people?

Throughout our history this question tends to resurface and reformulate itself. The events of our times are not so much different, though we can hope they can be less destructive.

If we are a people, then we are our neighbor's keeper. So, when our neighbor falters it hurts us all. If we are simply a confederation of individuals, then our neighbor's wellbeing is less important.

This is the framing of many of the debates throughout our nation. From public education to public health to the management of public resources, we continue to argue about whether we are better off when we are all better off.

In Aesop's "Four Oxen and the Lion," four oxen in a field are safe as they work together, but they become lunch for the lion after they argue and separate. There lies the root for the often misapplied quote from Patrick Henry, "United we stand, divided we fall."

Throughout our history, there has been a consistent effort in this country to divide us. We're not seen as one due to our ethnic heritage, our skin tone or the money in our purse. There are continual elements that argue that "We" are united against other citizens we call "Them." We tend to have a difficult time believing that we are simply united.

As we tend to celebrate our Constitution as a hallmark of modern civilization, we too often forget that it begins with the phrase "We the People."

Debate is an important part of democratic discourse. As we look to the future, we should do more than tolerate disagreement, we should seek it. We have consistently found that two heads are better than one and that a tolerant discussion leads to a better, third way.

Ultimately, we need to agree that we are a people. That is the bedrock of the ideals set down by our founders. This goes for those of us whose ancestors were here at the founding as well as for the multitudes who came later. This includes those of us who have a good education and health care and includes those of us who do not. This should also include those future citizens our founders called "our posterity."

Our debate should be about how to better serve our nation and its citizenry. If our society doesn't serve all of us well, then we should argue for better inclusion for all. We should try to avoid leaving the "us" out of the U.S.