**Final Thoughts by Paul Cunningham**

November 1, 2004 was the first time this Final Thoughts piece appeared in *The Notebook*, or at least its core message did. That was the day before the 55th quadrennial presidential election, when sitting President George W. Bush defeated the Democratic Party candidate Senator John Kerry. The big issues then were the War on Terrorism, the economy, jobs, healthcare and moral values. It turns out that 19th Century French journalist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr was actually spot-on when he said, “As much as things change, they remain the same.”

Other verses of the same song were included in this space on election eves 2008 and 2012 as a reminder that voting is the cornerstone of our democracy. It is a right for all Americans that wasn’t automatically guaranteed when the U.S. Constitution was finally ratified in 1789, but came through a process that spanned 175 years. It should never be taken for granted. Every American over the age of 18 has the opportunity to honor that process and participate in governing themselves by casting a vote, whether for President of the United States or for representation on the local school board.

That makes tomorrow, November 8, 2016, the most important day of the year in America. It’s a celebration of us, mattering more than our yearly observances of Independence Day, Memorial Day and Veteran’s Day, or any day set aside to commemorate the birth of a past president or founding father. On the other hand, it is all of those special occasions – with Christmas and Thanksgiving thrown in, to boot – wrapped up in one 18-hour period, from the opening of polls on the East Coast to the time they close in Hawaii.

While each Election Day is special, a Presidential Election Day comes around only every four years. It’s when we get to step into the tiny confines of a voting booth to do our part to continue the Great American Experiment, which is how French historian Alexis de Tocqueville termed our unique brand of democracy back in the 1830s. We each have the opportunity to cast our individual vote to decide who will lead this country for the next four years to keep it great or make it great again.

Whether you view voting as a right, a privilege, a duty, a responsibility or an obligation, I hope you’ll be right in the middle of the crowd at your precinct, standing in line, awaiting your turn to complete a ballot to indicate your choices, if you have not yet voted early. While in line, try to forget about the cesspool of acrimony into which our election campaigns have fallen and ponder instead these thoughts about voting written down long ago by just a few of the men who led this country through some trying times in its infancy, so that you have the opportunity that you’re waiting for.

Thomas Jefferson, often considered the architect of many of America’s democratic institutions, wrote, “Governments are instituted among men deriving their just power from the consent of the governed.” We give that consent through our vote.

John Jay, a delegate to the First Continental Congress and later the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, said, “The Americans are the first people whom Heaven has favored with an opportunity of deliberating upon and choosing the forms of government under which they should live.” Perhaps voting is an obligation above all.

A few years before coming out on the unfortunate end of a duel and centuries before becoming the subject of a blockbuster Broadway musical, Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury and one of America’s first constitutional lawyers, said, “A share in the sovereignty of the state, which is exercised by the citizens at large in voting at elections, is one of the most important rights of the subject, and in a republic ought to stand foremost in the estimation of the law.” Then, there was William Penn, who, some say, was the first great hero of American liberty. He said, “Governments, like clocks, go from the motion men give them.” Every time we exercise our vote, we help to rewind the clock for another cycle.

Voting is now a birthright for each of us, one that multiple millions of people in other nations envy. So, don’t fritter it away. Get out tomorrow and cast your ballot. Vote your choice, your conscience and your convictions. It’s immaterial whether you think of yourself as an independent voter, an R, a D, an L or a G. Just do it. If you don’t like the way things turn out, be ready to try again to change things the next time around. As Jefferson once observed, “Through their right of suffrage, the people exercise their sovereign power over government. If things are not going right, they can throw one set of interests out and elect another that promises a revision of the course that government has taken.”

\[\text{Day}\]