



Dear America,

Happy 250th Birthday.

A nation born of audacious ideas, that ordinary people could govern themselves, that freedom and enterprise together could unlock human potential, and that a community of neighbors could build something greater than any one of them could imagine alone. It was a radical bet. And generation after generation, Americans have refused to let it fail.

Milestones like this invite us to celebrate. But they also demand something harder and deeper: honest reflection. Who are we? How did we get here? And, most urgently, what are we willing to do to earn the next 250 years?

The first chamber of commerce in the United States was founded in 1768, eight years before the Declaration of Independence was signed. We have been part of this story from before there was a country. We have watched it unfold from every Main Street, every factory floor, every startup, every boardroom, every city council, every moment when a community had to decide: are we going to face this together, or fall apart?

Time and again, Americans have chosen to face it together.

That choice has never been easy. And it has never been automatic.

America's prosperity was not gifted to us. It was built by entrepreneurs who staked everything on an unproven idea, by businesses that solved problems the world said couldn't be solved, and by civic leaders who looked at a struggling town and saw beyond what it was to what it could become. It was built by people who understood that innovation is not just a technology strategy, it's a mindset. A refusal to accept that the way things are is the way they have to be.

That spirit of ingenuity is America's greatest competitive advantage. It always has been. And it can forever be our unique differentiator if we protect it, invest in it, and refuse to let it be extinguished by cynicism, short-termism, or the comfortable inertia of the status quo.

But prosperity does not sustain itself.

Every thriving community in this country, every successful economy, every resilient neighborhood, every business that grew and created jobs and changed lives, had leaders behind it. Not perfect leaders. But leaders who showed up, who took the long view when short-term gains would be easier and who invested in people, infrastructure, education, and building a strong civic fabric that unifies a community when everything else pulls it apart.

That is the work chambers of commerce exist to support. And at our country's milestone birthday, it is more urgent than ever.

America faces major challenges: workforce shortages; housing crises; infrastructure deficits; technological disruption moving faster than our institutions can absorb; economic transformation that is lifting some communities and leaving others behind; and a political environment that too often rewards division over solution.

These are not abstract problems. They show up in the stories of a small business owner who can't find workers. A family that can't afford to live in the community where they work. A young person weighing whether to stay where they grew up or leave for somewhere that offers a better way of life.

I know these stories because chambers live them every day.

Here is what I also know: the communities winning these battles are not waiting for someone else to solve their problems. They have business leaders and government leaders working side by side. They have chambers convening people across every sector including employers, educators, elected officials, nonprofit leaders and entrepreneurs. They aren't gathering to point fingers about problems, but to move from conversation to action. They have people who are willing to put the long-term health of their community ahead of their own short-term convenience.

That is civic leadership. And we need more of it.

Throughout our history, America has moved forward not because we agreed on everything, but because enough people remained committed to the hard, unglamorous work of self-governance. We debated. We listened. We compromised. We adapted. We built institutions we were willing to hold ourselves accountable to. And when those institutions fell short, the best among us worked to make them better rather than simply walking away.

That tradition is not a relic. It is the lifeline our communities need, right now.

In a moment when trust in nearly every American institution has declined, local chambers of commerce have [earned and maintained theirs](#). We do not take that lightly. Trust is not a reward for past performance. It is a daily obligation to continue to provide the civic leadership our communities and country need. It means showing up when it's hard. It means bringing people to the table who disagree. It means advocating fiercely for economic prosperity while never losing sight of the community that prosperity is meant to serve.

So as we mark this birthday, here is my call to action to every business leader, every elected official, every educator, every entrepreneur, every person who has ever wondered whether their involvement could make a difference:

It can. And we need you.

We need you to lead but not someday, not when things are less busy, or when the timing is better. We need you now. We need you to invest in your community the way the founders of this nation invested in theirs with urgency, with ingenuity, and with the belief that what you do today will matter to people you will never meet.

Embrace the discomfort of innovation and be willing to let go of what worked yesterday in pursuit of what will work tomorrow. The leaders who will build tomorrow's industries are alive today, waiting for someone to create the conditions where they can thrive. Young people are energized, creative, and hungry to build something that matters.

We need you to choose engagement over cynicism. To show up to the school board meeting, the chamber luncheon, the city council session or the community roundtable. The alternative is ceding the future to people who are less invested in it than you are.

Economic prosperity is not solely a business goal. It's a civic responsibility. When businesses thrive, communities thrive. When communities invest in their workforce, infrastructure and quality of life, then businesses succeed. This is a covenant. And it only works when both sides honor it.

The American story has always been one of bold possibility. Not because success was guaranteed, but because each generation accepted the responsibility to build something better for the next. That is our inheritance. And it is our obligation.

That is the America I believe in. Not a perfect America, because there has never been one. But an America that keeps reaching. That keeps building. That keeps betting on itself.

Chambers of commerce across this country will not waver from that obligation. We will convene. We will advocate. We will build. We will lead. That is what this country has always asked of those who love it. For 250 years, we have answered that call. And we'll be here supporting this nation's prosperity for the next 250.

Happy Birthday, America. The best is still ahead, but only if we build it together.

Always in service,
Sheree Anne

Sheree Anne Kelly
President & CEO
Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives