It is often referred to as an “arc” in speeches and narratives. It is comprised of events, milestones, and trends that propel a society forward either toward continued growth and prosperity, or to its eventual demise. Those who refuse to study it are said to be “doomed to repeat it.” It’s “written by the victors.” It serves as both a reminder of our shared moral purpose, and a cautionary tale of our shortcomings and failures as a society. Ultimately, it should cause us all to strive to be better – both individually and collectively as a society.

A quick train ride through the past 172 years will reveal that Florida’s history is ripe with juxtapositions and contradictions, if nothing else. A few stops along the way illustrate this dichotomy. On March 3, 1845,
Florida became the 27th State in the Republic. We beat Texas to the punch by a few months. Our very first state flag had three words emblazoned on it in very large print.

Yes, the first thought our great state had upon entering the Republic was effectively, “Stay away – leave us be – get out.” Now, let’s contrast this fact to the current fuel in Florida’s economic engine. In 2016, the Sunshine State welcomed more than 112 million people from every other state and more than 100 countries to what has become the most-visited location on the planet. Tourism has become, and will continue to be, one of the single biggest economic drivers of prosperity for our state. Quite a long way from “Let Us Alone.”

If we fast forward a bit (137 years) to 1982, we can reflect on the graduation ceremony at Miami’s Palmetto High School. On that day, the class valedictorian gave a relatively typical graduation speech. However, toward the end of that speech he made a bold claim – that he would change the world. Not that his class would, not that his generation would, that he would change the world. And like so many other graduates of Florida high schools in the early 80s, he promptly left the state for college and to seek out his path in life. He eventually landed, of all places, in Washington State.

Florida lost him, and so many others like him. We lost him because of the lack of economic opportunity relative to other states. But what is so spectacular about this one Miami high school grad? Twelve years after his graduation speech, that Palmetto High valedictorian founded a small internet book shop called Amazon and today Jeff Bezos’ worth is somewhere between $85 and $87 BILLION depending on market fluctuations. And we lost him. To Washington State.

If we jump ahead and contrast that loss to the past 20 years of our state’s economic trajectory, we will find a very different
trend. We will see that Florida consistently has one of the best business climates in the United States, our education system is improving through public school reforms and the expansion of school choice, our state government has one of the most efficient and effective operations in the entire country, and -- over the past 20 years -- more than $125 billion in annual income has migrated from states like Illinois, New Jersey, and Connecticut to Florida.

**Why is that?**

Well, we would make the case that somewhere around the mid to late 90s Floridians made decisions about the state that they wanted to live in, and the future we wanted. We made conscious and unconscious decisions in who we voted for, what values we had as communities, and what we wanted for our kids, grandkids, and their grandkids.

What did we choose? Well – unlike states like Illinois and Connecticut and others that chose paths of fiscal destruction – Florida chose to move in the direction of economic liberty and personal freedom. We chose to say no to a state income tax and to live with a state budget that corresponds to that decision. Today, Florida and New York are very close in population – Florida is currently slightly ahead of New York, and the “Empire State” is experiencing a period of decline. Now when you look at state budgets, however, Florida’s budget is roughly $83 billion. New York? $163 billion. And anyone who has traversed the Long Island Expressway could attest to the fact that we derive far more value for our tax dollar than New Yorkers could ever hope for.

In choosing to embrace the principles of limited government, free markets, and economic freedom, we allowed competition to flourish, economies to thrive, and industries to incubate. Now, are we perfect? By no means. There is still much work to be done, and the opponents of liberty and champions of oppressive government are pushing back. But we have the right trajectory. And that is, in our opinion, the best benchmark of where we as a state are headed.

It is against this 172-year arc that our great state currently stands at an historic precipice. In 2018, Florida faces an election that will define our future in ways unlike any other election we have seen in our lifetime. In 2018, Florida will choose a new Governor and Lieutenant Governor, as well as a brand new Cabinet (Attorney General, Commissioner of Agriculture, and Chief Financial Officer). Due to age-related term limits, three of Florida’s seven Supreme Court justices will be retiring, with the new justices to be appointed by the new Governor. Every single one of Florida’s 27 congressional representatives will be up for reelection. All 120 seats in the Florida House of Representatives will be on the ballot. Half of Florida’s 40 state senate seats will be on the ballot. Florida’s United States Senator Bill Nelson will be defending his seat. In addition to these races, Florida’s unique system of Constitutional reform – the Constitution Revision Commission – will present amendment initiatives for Floridians to vote up or down.

Considering the dynamic nature of political and policy debates, this election will ultimately be a demarcation point for our state. Will we continue to embrace the
principles set forth by leaders like Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Rick Scott, Will Weatherford, and so many others? Will we turn away from the idea that government should not be in the business of picking winners and losers in the economy? Will Florida continue to embrace a consistent and level playing field for economic activity and maintain our positive trajectory? Will we turn toward government mandating policies like job-killing minimum wages and socialized health care that harms those most in need? Will we continue to respect the property rights of all Floridians? Will we engage in big government land grabs that destroy our local economies? Will we continue to acknowledge that as technology and innovation expand opportunity, a system of education that shackles kids to failing schools must modernize to expand parent and education choice? Will we become beholden to union agendas that care little for hundreds of thousands of children trapped in failure factories?

These are just a few of the fundamental questions that all Floridians — not just those in elected office — will tackle in the monumental year ahead of us. We owe it to our children, our grandchildren, and their grandchildren to be deliberate, informed, and reasoned in our dialogue. It is my hope that the debate will be robust and not succumb to demonization. I hope that those in elected office, as well as those representing community and citizen groups, stakeholders, and advocacy organizations will recognize the importance of the 2018 cycle, and take hold of their best selves. Let’s make this a debate we will look back on with pride — one in which we all articulated our vision for Florida’s future in a way that reflected our faith in the rightness of our principles, not in the character assassination so prevalent in this day.

The James Madison Institute will forge ahead into our 31st year maintaining the principles that have propelled our success as a beacon of liberty and prosperity. We remain committed to the belief that freedom has worked every single place it has been tried and to the understanding that free markets have done more to lift two billion people out of poverty than any government program. It is our sincere hope that you will engage alongside us. Whether from the “left” or the “right,” “conservative” or “liberal,” “populist” or “capitalist,” our state’s future depends on each and every one of us engaging in the battle of ideas.

With all of this on the horizon, we are pleased to present to you this issue of The Journal.

In the Spirit of Liberty and Freedom,

Sal Nuzzo
Vice President of Policy
The James Madison Institute