When I left the State Department in January 2011, I was grateful to return to a tenured position at an idyllic university. I considered going back to Washington in a future administration after my sons, now 14 and 17, went to college or at least left the house. But as I made clear in an article I wrote in the summer of 2012 for the Atlantic, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” I was thrilled to be back home with them in the remaining time that we could all be together, under one roof.

So no one is more surprised than I am that I left Princeton — taking on the Yoda-like status of “professor emerita” — for a new job that once again has me commuting, yes, to Washington a few days a week (though on my own schedule now).

I wouldn’t have done this for a government job or a position at another university. No, the singular appeal of my new job as president and chief executive of the New America Foundation is the chance to widen the transmission belt that moves academic ideas toward policy and action.

That transmission belt between the academy and Washington is frayed these days. In many disciplines, the worlds of the university and of government are growing further apart. In international relations, for instance, leading scholars used to move in and out of government far more often than they do today. McGeorge Bundy and Henry Kissinger were Harvard professors; Walt Rostow hailed from MIT; Zbigniew Brzezinski came from Columbia; George Shultz had been at Stanford. And the list goes on.

Over the years, however, the growing specialization of many academic fields has made that passage harder to navigate. At the same time, Washington think tanks have proliferated, adding endowed chairs and research centers that attract highly qualified experts and that often replicate the intellectual infrastructure that once only universities could provide.

Great American universities, however, still host the world’s best thinkers and researchers. Many of these scholars have plenty to say about the most important problems facing our nation. In addition to tapping the many talented journalists, analysts and advocates who make up Washington’s intellectual community, I hope that the New America Foundation can provide a better link between scholars and politicians, and can engage a broader swath of the public in designing and implementing solutions to the nation’s problems.

I was initially attracted to New America, and became a board member 10 years ago, because of its dedication to the proposition that the United States periodically reinvents itself. Ted Halstead, New America’s founding president, suggested to his fellow visionaries — including Michael Lind, Sherle Schwenninger and Walter Russell Mead — that their institution be named after
Lind’s 1995 book, “The Next American Nation.” In it, Lind argued that each reinvention of America, however incomplete and imperfect, has produced a better society than the one that preceded it. Reconstruction improved on the antebellum republic, and the New Deal created a “new America” that represented a great advance over the Gilded Age.

But we do not reinvent ourselves randomly. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and told his fellow marchers that “when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” The marchers were there, he said, “to cash this check.”

And a century earlier, in his attack on the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that when the founders declared “that all men are created equal,” they were clearly not describing their own reality; many were slaveholders. Still, he said:

“They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all . . . constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people, of all colors, everywhere.”

In my 2007 book, “The Idea That Is America,” I argued that our history is a continual “process of trying to live up to our ideals, falling short, succeeding in some places, and trying again in others.”

We are today desperately in need of the next American renewal, one that will require major social and economic transformations, as well as sweeping reform of our political system, rejecting our partisan divide and creating new coalitions.

It would be presumptuous for the New America Foundation or any other single institution to claim to know what the next America will be or should be. And it would be presumptuous for me at this point to impose an overarching agenda. We celebrate heterodoxy, and I can barely find my office.

But my vision, as I prepare to reengage in Washington’s policy marketplace, is of a renewed America that cares about and for our people.

We are a nation that thrives on competition, from sports teams to small businesses. We define success by who wins, typically through talent, luck and working harder than anyone else. If everyone pursues their self-interest, all of society benefits.

But winning is not everything, much less the only thing. Competition must go hand in hand with care. As Bill Gates has put it, “There are two great forces of human nature: self-interest and caring for others.”

Care starts from the premise that humans cannot survive alone. Our progress flows from our identity as social animals, connected through love, kinship and clanship. Success should be
defined not as individual victory but as group advancement, whether the group is a family, a
community or a company. Satisfaction comes less from beating others than from bolstering
them, enabling them to reach their full potential. The betterment of the group helps the individual
as well. All members have the security of knowing that they are part of a community and that
when they are young or old, ill or weak, they will be cared for.

I imagine an America that invests in the infrastructure of care like we invest in the infrastructure
of capitalism: high-quality, affordable child care and eldercare; higher wages and better training
for caregivers; support structures allowing our elders to live at home longer; paid family and
medical leave for women and men; flexible work arrangements to give breadwinners who are
also caregivers equal chance to advance; financial and social support for single parents; higher
pay and far greater respect for the caring professions. These are the equivalents of roads, bridges,
tunnels and terminals.

I am not a utopian. Rather, I want to return to our roots, to recommit to a communal strand in our
history and civic mythology. Frontier stories of barn-raisings and quilting bees are just as
celebrated as Wild West shootouts. When Alexis de Tocqueville came to the young United
States, he commented less on our individualism than on our remarkable social capital — we
create civic associations for every purpose imaginable — and on our “habits of the heart.”

Common purpose creates the trust and empathy that reveal us as individual human beings, not as
statistics and stereotypes. It is then harder not to care. That cohesion, as Robert Putnam has
shown, is the foundation of a successful democracy. And it is a precondition for achieving our
founding credo of equality.

I imagine a new America where people recognize that providers of physical, intellectual,
emotional and spiritual care are as indispensable as providers of income. If we valued
breadwinning and caregiving equally, then we would value male caregivers as much as we have
come to value female breadwinners. We would recognize that single parents, who must be the
sole breadwinners and caregivers for families that often include older relatives as well as
children, need special help. And we would embrace marriage for everyone and support policies
that strengthen long-term commitments among family members, however constructed.

Equality is the ideal to strive for in the next era of American renewal. Yet just as important is the
pursuit of happiness, the most idiosyncratic of American values. Happiness can certainly be
 gained through individual achievement, but it is equally reached through strong and fulfilling
relationships, the foundation of connectedness and care. When we impose solitary confinement
as one of our most severe forms of punishment, we recognize the equation between loneliness
and unhappiness.

Elevating care alongside competition would have implications for our foreign policy as well. It
would underpin a new era of U.S. leadership, affecting where and how we work with other
nations on issues of water, food, climate, poverty and the violence that rips apart everyday lives.
When we looked at Syria, Egypt or any country menaced by government violence and
government failure, we would see not only that government’s political allegiances and its place
on the global chessboard. We would also see human beings who want the same things we do:
jobs, education, a better life for their children. An uncaring foreign policy will haunt us — through the global ties of our own citizens and through the channels that transmit crime, disease, recession and other ills across borders.

The strategies and solutions we require will not be developed on Washington’s compressed political timelines. More often, they will come from academics turned politicians, such as Elizabeth Warren and, before her, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and from new generations of problem-solvers drawn from our very best thinkers, activists and inventors.

Happy dreams, perhaps — but the kind America was built on. For an institution named New America, they come with the territory.