Opinion

News



A cross-shaped World War I memorial, a landmark in Bladensburg, Maryland, is pictured Feb. 26. In a 7-2 vote, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 20 in favor of preserving a historic cross-shaped memorial, saying the cross did not endorse religion. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

June 24, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I rise to defend Clio, the muse of history, who has been under attack by the ignorant mavens of political correctness, who seem to have taken over college campuses and, in turn, unduly influence cultural politics, especially on the left.

No one should be surprised that former Vice President Joe Biden is a master of verbal miscues. But the reaction to his comment about once being able to work even with segregationists in the Senate — Sen. Cory Booker and Sen. Kamala Harris demanded an apology — is so overwrought, it makes the Democrats seem precisely like the kind of prickly cousin everyone dreads at holiday time. For starters, Biden was not defending segregationists: He was making the point that back then, and unlike today, senators found ways to work even with people they disagreed with profoundly. The real butt of his comments was Sen. Mitch McConnell whose scorched earth partisanship has wrecked the U.S. Senate. The problem with spying racism or patriarchy or homophobia behind every tree is that when you confront the genuine article, you have cried wolf once too often to be believed and you alienate well-intentioned people who, like Biden, sometimes trip on their words.

The real reason to take issue with what Biden said is that he seems to think it was his charm that made the Senate operate smoothly. He is, indeed, a man of great charm, but the Senate of today is not the Senate he joined in 1973. As Jonathan Chait argued in New York Magazine:

> [M]odern leaders have learned that the old conventional wisdom that voters would punish them for failing to get along is false. As Mitch McConnell has bluntly explained, persuadable voters do not pay close attention to policy details. If they see leaders in both parties getting along, they will assume things are going well, and — this is the crucial detail — they will consequently reward the party in power. If they see a nasty partisan fight, they will assume Washington is failing, and reward the

> opposition. To ask the opposing party to compromise with the majority party is to ask it to undermine its own political interest.

This may be regrettable, but it is a fact. There are structural, demographic and deeply seated cultural reasons McConnell brags about the Senate becoming a graveyard for legislation passed in the House. If the next Democratic president wants to get anything done, they need to win the Senate too.

The kerfuffle over Biden's comments is only the latest attempt by some on the left to impose a retroactive moral calculus that rests upon an anachronistic sense of history. Earlier this year, Mayor Pete Buttigieg floated the idea of removing Thomas Jefferson's name from party fundraising dinners because he was a slave owner. At Princeton, the board of trustees refused to rename school buildings that bore the name Woodrow Wilson, but they agreed to remove a mural of the former president of the school and the country that was "overly celebratory." Wilson was a bigot of the first order, anti-black and anti-Catholic, but he brought us the income tax, which should cause us to cut him a little slack.

The debate over reparations for slavery raises a variety of historical issues. Charles Blow, at the New York Times, delivered a fine rebuttal to Sen. Mitch McConnell's simplistic objections to reparations, but the problem with reparations is different. Intergenerational solidarity is complicated, especially when you are taking a category drawn from commutative justice (reparations), but the only remedy involves distributive justice. But, this topic deserves a column all its own.

Advertisement

History did receive a small victory last week, when the Supreme Court voted 7-2 to allow the Bladensburg Cross to remain in place. It is true that no one in their right mind would today suggest a 40 foot tall concrete cross as an appropriate symbol in the public square, but the cross was built right after World War I and nobody objected until a few years back when the American Humanist Association decided to cause a stink.

Justice Samuel Alito rightly set aside the Lemon test that the Court had typically applied to Establishment Clause cases. These cases are tricky and there really is no "one size fits all" standard. In this case, the cross, though always a Christian symbol,

also had a de facto secular significance or, more accurately, in the 1920s, they did not draw the distinctions between the secular and the religious as we do today. Alito pointed to Notre Dame in Paris, a place of worship of course, but also now a symbol of the city and indeed of France. He noted that no one is arguing on First Amendment grounds that San Diego and San Francisco should change their names because, after all, their original meaning was explicitly religious. The problem with the humanists' argument and with the jurisprudence Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg embraced in her dissent (and with the Lemon analysis debunked by Alito), is that life has fewer either/or's than the ideologues think, symbols are intertwined with history in quirky ways. Alito was correct that "requiring their removal or alteration would not be viewed by many as a neutral act" and "would not further the ideals of respect and tolerance embodied in the First Amendment."

The left's desire to rummage around people's past, with no sense of how culture has changed in the meantime, is very misguided. If a person's past is to stalk them, where is the incentive to change and grow? Besides, healthy political parties and cultural institutions seek converts, and unhealthy ones seek heretics. This fetish for a pristine past, for example, would leave no room for Barack Obama who ran for the presidency as an opponent of gay marriage, did he not?

It is time for the left to grow out of its adolescent intellectual titillations and to grow up. History has many lessons, the greatest of which is that people and cultures change. In the words of Blessed John Henry Newman, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*