Opinion

News



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More than most countries, America has always been as much about an idea as about a place, and the idea has always been an object of debate. This year, as we prepare to celebrate the nation's birthday, the idea of America is being contested on terrain most of us thought was in our past, with the resurgence of a racially tinged understanding of the American nation. That resurgence is marked by a disdain for human decency towards those defined as "other" that we associate with antebellum slavery or 1920s eugenicist, nativist hatreds.

The America that I love is the America of Abraham Lincoln, whose Gettysburg Address drives home the liberal idea at the heart of our national experiment when he called America, "a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It is the America of Thomas Jefferson who, like us all, could not grasp the ideals he articulated in his own affairs and circumstances but who, nonetheless, articulated the liberal ideals of the American founding in ways that made the systemic slavery he could not resist a doomed affront to liberty. It is the America that welcomed, more or less, my Polish grandparents and my Irish great-great-grandparents. The America I love is decent as Jimmy Carter is decent, learned about the past as Harry Truman was learned about the past, visionary as Franklin Delano Roosevelt was visionary.

The idea of America, though liberal at its core, has also been steeped in religion, especially Protestantism, and the two have always coexisted, sometimes uneasily. We felt the need to reach back through the centuries and turn the Pilgrims into seekers of religious freedom, of which there was plenty for them in Holland: They came because the economic opportunities in the Calvinist Netherlands were lacking. The American Revolution was a decidedly ideological affair, with many founders wanting different things from the founding, but the most basic and unifying ideological stance that lit the revolutionary fuse was the anti-Catholic, country whig ideology of the early Hanoverian period. Abolitionism was constructed in the churches. Lincoln himself, though not a churchgoer, availed himself of both the language and the moral logic of Christianity. Manifest Destiny was cast in religious terms, as was our "crusade" in Europe during two world wars.

Last week, I spoke with Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas. Just hours before, he had accompanied migrants who had applied for asylum in the U.S. and were being

sent back across the border under the terms of the Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy. He visited the refugee center in Ciudad Juarez. "The shelter space in Ciudad Juarez is completely overwhelmed," Seitz told me. "Their resources are far less than ours." The people are told their wait might be as long as a year to have their asylum case heard.

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On the return trip to the U.S. Seitz brought with him a Honduran family and a man with cognitive disabilities from El Salvador, all of whom met the exemptions from the "Remain in Mexico" policy, but were sent back anyway. The family – father, mother and three young children – had been at the shelter in Ciudad Juarez for three months. They all went to the Immigration and Customs checkpoint. There was such a crowd of reporters, that they unintentionally blocked the passageway, the bishop explained. Negotiations ensued and, finally, word came down that they were to be admitted into the U.S. "I certainly felt God was at work," Seitz said. "What a joy to be able to walk back onto U.S. soil with this little girl's hand in mine. It gave one a real feeling of elation." The family will be in custody for a short time and the diocese has already made arrangements to reunite them with family here in the States.

What about Seitz's story is at odds with our national story? What is "un-American"?

There is a different vision of American nationalism, steeped in racism and championed by the president of the United States. This uncouth man, devoid of both liberalism and religious sensibility, is the one at odds with America's finest civic traditions. There is no generosity of spirit in him, indeed his understanding of nationalism is a mere extension of his narcissism: He likes America when America looks like him. Oh, and we now know he likes tanks at his parades.

Sadly, we have come to expect no more from the president. But, no one versed in Catholic social thought could be attracted to this brutish nationalism, could they? What, then, is going on at First Things? Yesterday, I called attention to an article about the conservative magazine by Emma Green at The Atlantic.

Green writes that the magazine and its editor Rusty Reno have come to view corporate influence as "pernicious," and that "rather than fighting against the current political moment, the magazine has evolved along with the GOP base toward a positive vision of nationalist politics. They hope that Trump's popularity is the sign

of an opening — for conservative orthodoxy, and for a nationalist movement to replace today's progressive, globalized world order." Those sentiments are understandable in part and worrisome in part, but not loathsome.

Until you get to this:

> More substantively, the magazine has opened a spirited debate about Trump's war on immigration. When I asked Reno about the president's comments referring to Mexicans as rapists and criminals, and the family-separation policy that left dozens of migrant children stranded in government vans for 24 hours or more, Reno replied, "I don't do policy, but if we don't gain control of the border, it's going to be a serious problem for the entire generation." There are "sociological limits" to how many immigrants can be assimilated into the United States, he said. When I asked him whether he would be as concerned if there were a surge of migrants at America's northern border, he admitted that this would be less worrying: "Canadians are so similar," he said. "Part of it has to do with the cultural fit."

Aren't Canadians more likely than Central Americans to be steeped in the modern, liberal, globalist culture, dominated by corporate influence, fixated on political correctness, that Reno abhors? Are not Central Americans more likely to be steeped in commitment to family, that Reno elsewhere suggests is what our society needs? What, then, makes Canadians a better "cultural fit"? Watching conservative Christians make excuses for Trump's nationalism is as repugnant as watching liberal Christians make excuses for abortion-on-demand.

There came a time in my life, probably when I was a sophomore, when I became suspicious of the optimism that has long been a part of our national character and I remain suspicious of an overly linear conception of time in which human progress is seen as almost inevitable. And, as I have grown older, I have learned that hope is more profound than optimism. Still, optimism breeds generosity and imagination and our nation could use a shot of both. Optimism nurtures dreams while pessimism nurtures grievances. This July Fourth, I think of Bishop Seitz holding the hand of that little Honduran girl, and I feel the flicker of American optimism, and Christian hope, flame up in my heart and in the hearts of many. I hope that flame will banish the darkness of that racist nationalism that has hit our country like a plague.

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

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