Opinion



by Michael Sean Winters

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Wow — who knew that Amy Welborn had become dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism? She offered a nasty critique of my colleague Heidi Schlumpf's four-part series on EWTN, complaining that Schlumpf did not come to Alabama to poke around but relied mostly on public records like 990s and that she "collated things everyone already knows." Well, I had some bishops and cardinals tell me they learned a lot from the series, and the articles were included in the Rassegna Stampa, the clip service that is distributed to all nunciatures.

At Commonweal, Austen Ivereigh on Boris Johnson, the U.K.'s new Prime Minister. The money quote: "This ability to inhabit an idea, and to run at it courageously and quixotically while swatting away details and facts that get in its way — this is what makes Boris such a good newspaper columnist, and such a dangerous leader." Does anybody else find it odd that everyone refers to the new PM only by his given name? Like Oprah. But, given that his name is Boris, it always makes me think that Natasha and Bullwinkle are going to show up.

In The Washington Post, Nicole Hemmer writes about how the questions coming from congressional Republicans in the hearings with former special counsel Bob Mueller may have seemed bizarre to most people but were Fox Newspeak, a series of conspiracy theories that appeal to the base but leave the rest of us scratching our

heads. Donald Trump's electoral secret, of course, is that his base includes voters who had never voted before. Still, he can't afford to lose too many traditional Republicans with this wackiness. And after Trump, will the base be as robust?

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Relatedly, and also at The Post, Dana Milbank labels Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell a Russian asset, and proceeds to make the case. He is unwilling to permit the Senate to consider any actions that might confront Russia's on-going attempts to influence our elections. Why? Do you think he has concluded that influence will help his team?

At Politico, Jack Farrell argues that the continuance of a strong economy will actually help the Democrats, not the Republicans, because many of those districts where the economy is doing well flipped to Democratic control in 2018, while those that remain mired in economic distress are still strong for Trump. I am suspicious of comparing a midterm to a general election, but Farrell is on to something important: When the economy is bad, it is the only issue, but when it is good, other issues rise to the surface.

In The New York Times, Mary Williams Walsh looks at the financial mess that faces the incoming governor of Puerto Rico. I was glad to see that Walsh focused on the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), the island's public utility, which has long been an impediment to the island's most necessary structural change: Building a clean energy infrastructure on an island with ample wind and solar resources but where, today, only 1% of the island's power comes from those renewable sources.

In Detroit News, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel has formed a hate crimes division of her department. This is the kind of project that needs to be very un-fuzzy. Certainly, there are hate groups that advocate and get involved in violence, and they should be prosecuted. But the Michigan AG's office should not be a branch outlet for the Southern Poverty Law Center, which has sadly come to epitomize some of the least liberal attitudes on the left. For example, Church Militant is a hateful group, but are they a hate group? Should they be prosecuted? I can think of three ways the First Amendment protects their right to spread vile nonsense, and while I would not cross the street to help anyone on their staff, I will defend their constitutional rights to the last.

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

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