

Patriotism During Troubled Times

By Frederic Hof

For the first time in my lifetime – one that includes memories of American soldiers escorting nine African American children to school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 – it seems that a critical mass of Americans has, at long last, grasped the reality of systemic racism and the need to fight it and end it. This is patriotism at its best.

Yet a by-product of this long overdue and still pending national course correction is the apparent belief of some citizens that our original sin of racism renders our traditional history a lie, our Founders hypocrites, our belief in America's positive role in the world absurd, and our time-honored rites of patriotism obscene.

These reactions are understandable given outrages stretching back 400 years. Still, they place in jeopardy our ability as a people to bring about real change for the better. They do so by gratuitously denigrating traditional forms and symbols of patriotism to which most Americans – including (if not featuring) supporters of racial justice – cling.

As Mississippi annuls the stars and bars flag, and as the removal from American military bases of names associated with the 1861-65 insurrection becomes thinkable, it is tempting to believe that the popular critical mass for positive change is a political fait accompli; something to be automatically translated into supportive electoral and legislative results. It is not. And the choice of a battle axe instead of a scalpel to confront deeply troubling aspects of American history and culture may yet produce the backlash that extends the political lives of those who saw the public execution of George Floyd as unpleasant, but not necessarily suggestive of anything broadly problematical in American society.

It is true that recent polling gives comfort to those who earnestly desire a president and a Congress inclined to move forward on issues of racial justice. But the election is four months away. And the incumbent is making it increasingly clear that he intends to supplement his solid electoral base – a sizeable, highly motivated minority – with others to whom he will appeal on narrowly defined cultural and patriotic grounds.

Those who apply the battle axe to Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Grant, and others they deem historically evil or unworthy will, like it or not, facilitate the aforementioned electoral strategy. Those who swing the battle axe at all agencies of local law enforcement, demanding de-funding instead of fundamental reform, will also – like it or not – run the risk of stopping the clock for another four years, delaying and deferring action on racial justice, immigration reform, climate change, public health, income inequality, quality education, and other key issues.

One can understand the attractiveness of blunt instruments after 400 years of mainly unmitigated outrage. One can (and must) understand the anger and frustration that sees the scalpel the same way people of a different political persuasion see the mask: As a symbol of weakness and even cowardice.

It is debatable whether the axe or the scalpel was applied recently by Princeton University to Woodrow Wilson. In my childhood Wilson was routinely ranked as a near-great president. The presence of his

widow at John F. Kennedy's inauguration was celebrated. But Wilson was a child of the confederacy and a racist to his core, a person who re-segregated the federal civil service. Parenthetically, historians today also question his effectiveness as a wartime president and recognize his ineffectiveness at the Paris Peace Conference following the end of the Great War. He is finally getting the "recognition" he deserved from the beginning.

Is it not logical, therefore, that those Founders who owned human beings as personal property receive the same treatment as Wilson? One is free – a freedom guaranteed by the Constitution devised by those Founders – to make that argument. One is not free, however, to compel the American electorate to believe that two of our greatest presidents – one instrumental in founding the republic and one responsible for saving it – are, in fact, despicable villains.

The incumbent, however, is counting on the axe-wielders to do their best, and not just to statues in public places. He also prays that employers and even educators mandate crudely constructed re-education and sensitivity programs whose hastily contrived methods – not the intended message – may alienate large numbers of people gratuitously. Phrases like "politically correct thought police" may become commonplace on Twitter. He hopes to assign to his electoral opponent support for the proposition that police departments be starved of funds and even put out of business. He hopes to supplement a political base already resistant to racially related change (except perhaps for going in reverse) with millions of voters alienated by offensively promiscuous axe-wielding.

Today, those millions of potentially alienable voters are among those who George Floyd and his killer awakened to the truth of systemic racism in police departments and elsewhere in American society. The desire in the public at large to get things done to mitigate and ultimately fix the consequences of racism seems palpable; the minds of many seem at last to be open. The incumbent president should be swimming upstream in his attempt to stop the clock. But offensive and ineffective overreach by some demanding essential changes can still that current and even change its course.

In my Bard diplomacy class, I try to convince students that the U.S. ought to be represented abroad with skill and pride, notwithstanding our original sin of human bondage and the horrors it has wrought. In my own experience – especially when drawing attention to the flagrant human rights abuses of other countries – I have never shied away from acknowledging what has been done to people of color (including Native Americans) in my country. Indeed, I've found that honesty and transparency about the American experience and the ongoing American struggle to match ideals with reality defuses charges of hypocrisy everywhere, even sometimes among official counterparts obliged to defend the indefensible.

I've argued at home and abroad that our Founders gave us the tools – even battle axes when applied accurately and within the rule of law – to confront and overcome challenges to human rights and human dignity. For this – not for the evil socio-economic system into which many were born, raised, and even prospered – they deserve our perpetual thanks.

Confronting racism and working to erase its effects are profound acts of patriotism. They are fully consistent with actions and beliefs traditionally associated with love of country in the U.S.: National service, respect for those who serve, reverence for the flag, devotion to foundational documents (Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Gettysburg Address), and gratitude to the Founders – even the slaveowners.

These facets of patriotism ought to be as indivisible as the union they honor. But some who come at the issue of race from radically different places with starkly differing motives and objectives are today defining patriotism in ways that would divide and make losers of us all.

I strongly suspect that strangers seeing the American flag flying daily from my deck up on an elevated Catskills meadow make assumptions about my political beliefs. I think I know what most or all of them assume. I can only hope that the actions of justice seekers will not, over the next four months, encourage even more Americans to associate our beloved flag with the political fortunes of someone not at all dedicated to justice for all.