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Don't douse America's 'sacred fire'

"Well, I preach the Church without Christ," says a vivid Flannery O'Connor character named Hazel Motes. "I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way."

At the heart of Donald Trump's public rhetoric is a similar emptiness. He is a president who preaches America without exceptionalism. He is the leader of the free world who seldom mentions freedom. He belongs to a political faith in which America's political miracle is only for us, and dissidents and democratic activists are on their own, and those who are oppressed stay that way.

Trump's inaugural address was intended to signal the end of exceptionalism, at least in its international expression. In the speech, the American "way of life" is depicted as one among many – a homegrown product that is not for export. Two academics (perhaps with too much time on their hands) have calculated the frequency with which Trump uses "freedom" and "liberty" in speeches. Both words appear far less often than in other recent presidencies. Neither word breaks into the top 1,000 he uses.

Trump's rhetorical rejection of internationalism is an aberration from America's bipartisan, post-World War II foreign policy consensus. It is also a culmination of recent trends.

During the Barack Obama years, America retreated from internationalism in practice. At first, this may have been a reaction against George W. Bush's foreign policy. But Obama's tendency became a habit, and the habit hardened into a conviction. He put consistent emphasis on the risks of action and the limits of American power. In the revolt against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, following the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, as Russian influence returned to the Middle East, America inaction was taken as accommodation. "The fear of making things worse has paralyzed the United States from trying to make things better," said Russian dissident Garry Kasparov in recent congressional testimony.

This geostrategic retreat is consistent with a broader political trend. Summarizing recent survey data, researchers Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk conclude: "Citizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America and Western Europe have not

only grown more critical of their political leaders. Rather, they have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives."

This is a sobering development – the deconsolidation of support for liberal democracy itself. Both America and Europe are seeing the rise of leaders who have chosen to ride this trend rather than buck it. Trump's version of strongman democracy is only imaginable in this environment.

This shift has outward-facing consequences. Dissidents and democratic activists – often driven by a stubborn, defiant passion – are not going to give up because America loses its ideological nerve. But regimes tempted to crack down on them have greater confidence in impunity. America is now less likely to criticize their "way of life."

This shift also has inward-facing consequences. A nation that ceases to speak for human rights may become less confident in civil rights. This type of relativism – this neutrality between freedom and authoritarianism – is easily imported across the border.

But we are not there yet. And the Trump administration itself is divided on these matters. Stephen Bannon certainly has the president's ear and control of the speechwriting shop – which is strategic high ground. His ethnonationalists are anxious to get a running start on the road that would take America toward dishonor and failure. But the Defense and State Departments are headed by committed internationalists who understand that the growth of freedom is essential to long-term global stability and American security.

The tools of internationalism – a strong military, strong alliances, strong international institutions, strong support for global development and democracy promotion – have a considerable cost. "Such investment," said Kasparov, "is far more moral and far cheaper than the cycle of terror, war, refugees and military intervention that results when America leaves a vacuum of power."

In assuming this calling of leadership, it is not ethnicity that grips the American imagination and justifies sacrifice; it is the animating ideals of the country. And it is a national advantage that our deepest beliefs are in accord with the durable hopes of humanity.

We will not find security, only darkness, by dousing America's sacred fire.

Michael Gerson's email address is michaelgerson@washpost.com.



Michael Gerson

VALLEY VOICE

Why Obamacare must be boosted, not dismantled

One of the most frightening possibilities of any Affordable Care Act repeal is the prospect of losing coverage based on a pre-existing condition. As a medical social worker for over 30 years, I have first-hand knowledge about what can happen.

Right now the valley's rate of uninsured adults is only 13.9 percent. In 2013 it was 39.6 percent. Any change to the ACA could drive the uninsured rate right back up, which will impact our emergency rooms and the lives of all our neighbors living with pre-existing conditions like asthma, diabetes and HIV/AIDS.

Ten years ago in December I got a call from a lovely woman named Molly. She had just been diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Although she had current insurance that she had been on for over a year, she had a history of a NEGATIVE needle biopsy of the OTHER breast 3 years earlier. Her current insurance decided that this was a pre-existing condition that was not disclosed when she signed on for new insurance. They not only refused to pay for any future treatment (surgery, chemo) they also canceled her insurance retroactively back to her start date, leaving her with full payment for all the tests she had already received. She now had no access to either an oncologist or treatment.

We appealed the decision and began an application for special class of Medicaid that treats breast cancer but couldn't submit the application until the appeal was settled. The insurance appeal board only met once a month and they skipped the January meeting because someone was out on medical leave. They reviewed the appeal in February and denied it, but didn't communicate the denial to their database until March, so Molly still looked on paper as though she had insurance. So Medicaid would not accept our application until April. Even though we had cobbled together grants from local organizations, it



Maureen Forman

was very hard to find an oncologist and a surgeon who would agree to accept the grant until we could verify that Medicaid would be approved. She was awarded Medicaid in May – six months after her diagnosis. Molly passed away one year later from metastatic cancer.

I tell you this because if the Affordable Care Act had been in place at that time the insurance company could not have denied her coverage due to a pre-existing condition and she might be alive today. Ask anyone you know who has had cancer or HIV/AIDS how they feel about losing the protection of the Affordable Care Act and you will understand the vital importance of maintaining this provision.

If the insurance companies are freed of the constraints found in the ACA and allowed to determine their own exclusion policies, anything can be determined to be a pre-existing condition: tendonitis, diabetes, high cholesterol or even HPV. HPV is the fastest growing sexually transmitted disease among our college age students and is linked to cervical cancer. That means years from now, it is possible that our daughters and granddaughters could be denied coverage if they have the HPV virus.

The protective regulations in the Affordable Care Act prevent insurance companies from determining whether we live or die because of a pre-existing condition. Please let your congressman and senators know that this is a vital cornerstone of American health care and must be preserved.

Email Maureen Forman, executive director of JFS of the Desert, at mforman@jfsdesert.org.

SHARE YOUR VIEWS

The Desert Sun welcomes guest columns addressing local political and social issues.

General guidelines include:

- » Columns should be 500 to 550 words.
- » We print the author's photo and contact info (typically an email address) with the column.
- » Anonymous columns are never published.
- » Stick to a single topic and avoid personal attacks.
- » We reserve the right to edit and republish (including electronically) all columns.

Direct column submissions and questions to Al Franco, engagement editor/opinion, at al.franco@desertsun.com

YOUR VOICE

Pence's new pensiveness

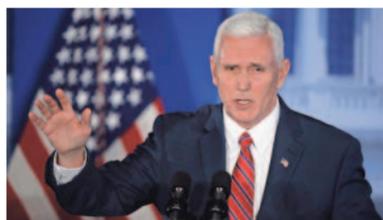
Strange how one extra little lie can so discombobulate an entire coven of pathological liars. But we bid Mr. Flynn a fond farewell and wish him a soft landing at RT or the Kremlin, or wherever he feels most at home.

One feels a certain sympathy for Vice President Mike Pence who must now, and for the foreseeable future, play the part of the court jester of the Trump regime. I hope they don't dress him in those three-toed shoes.

At least the source of his embarrassment has flown the coop. There's also some consolation in knowing that no one will be likely to ask, "What did Pence know and when did he know it?" That degree of judgment and character assessment is known as the null set.

Interesting also that it was "the lying press" that opened Pence's eyes to his own predicament. The boss man wouldn't do it. It's enough to make one feel pensive.

Bruce Strathdee, Palm Desert



MATT ROURKE, AP

Vice President Mike Pence speaks at the Republican congressional retreat in Philadelphia in January.

Thanks for the info

I just wanted say "thank you" to The Desert Sun reporters responsible for the in depth articles over the years which included ones on the plight of farmworkers in our valley, water and drought issues and, most recently, energy issues.

The articles are informative, well researched and very interesting. I also enjoy reading the syndicated

columns of Michael Gerson. In my opinion he firmly espouses moderate but firmly held moral and ethical beliefs.

Rosalind Hoover, Palm Springs

Walls that unite

To clarify the true meaning of Frost's "Mending Wall."

The title hints at the real purpose of good fences, which can and should do as much to bring neighbors together as to separate them for in the shared maintenance of those fences do they grow to know and understand each other and become better neighbors in the process.

Would that it were for Trump and Peña Nieto, America and Mexico. Now that is something to think about.

Richard Koretz, La Quinta

Assessing Trump for now

In rebuttal to Sen. Jeff Stone's Feb. 13 Valley Voice: Democrats do not fear President Trump's success. Rather, we

fear that he won't be successful and that he will do great damage to our country.

His campaign tactics were more divisive than during any other campaign. He has insulted just about everybody that he possibly could except for his own supporters.

I may not agree with everything the opposition party does. I don't agree with everything my party does, but recognize that our different ideologies come into play. I want success for our country. I want President Trump to do the right thing for all of us. At this point, however, he has behaved like a bull in a china shop.

Instead of assessing situations more carefully, such as the travel ban, he cared ahead. His plan to repeal Obamacare immediately will, hopefully, be modified. His Cabinet choices are the Wall Street insiders for whom he criticized Hillary Clinton. Environmentally we had made progress. The Republican Party plans to repeal this progress.

Why shouldn't we be afraid?

Lynn Trahan-Miller, Indio