

Silence is not an option in long march to pro-life America

COMMENTARY

By Michael McKenna
Sunday, April 16, 2023

OPINION:

The Republican Party and the pro-life cause have recently enjoyed a series of victories in the judicial arena (Dobbs) and suffered a series of setbacks in the electoral arena (the latest in Wisconsin).

That should come as no great surprise. The right-to-life movement has for five decades been focused like a laser on striking down Roe v. Wade and, eventually, reestablishing some legal constraints on the killing of children in the womb. When a great cause suddenly achieves an important goal, it is tough to reorient the effort immediately. Ask the abolitionists who were unprepared for the backlash against civil rights in the wake of the Civil War. That effort took almost 100 years to fully find its footing.

Nevertheless, it is time to embark on such a reorientation.

The pro-life cause, its allies and its cognates need to start to think more holistically about the problem facing us. There is, unfortunately, a lot of demand for abortion. Restraining the channels of supply legally is a necessary but probably insufficient approach. At some point, we will need to change hearts and minds and create a society in which abortion is the least attractive option, one in which it is not socially, personally or morally acceptable to consider abortion.

In short, we need to drive the idea of abortion to the social margins. Fortunately, we have a case study of social marginalization in the United States: cigarette smoking. As recently as 1965, smoking was common pretty much everywhere and at all times — prevalent in the movies and television, allowed in airplanes and restaurants, and even embraced in high schools.

What changed? Steady pressure from the public health community coupled with modest doses of legal discouragement (age and sales restrictions, taxes) and funding for cessation programs and alternatives have reduced the smoking rate, which had hovered above 40% in postwar America, to less than 15% of adults.

Of course, no analogy is perfect or precise. The pro-life community and its arguments would be stronger if they addressed both the demand and supply side of the problem.

Finally, we need to insist on better from our allies. Many Republicans have either remained or gone silent about the right to life. For example, not a single contestant for the Republican nomination for president in 2024 has said a word about the recent dueling court rulings on abortifacients. In some instances, they seem almost indifferent to Dobbs.

The Supreme Court's Dobbs decision sending the issue of abortion back to the states was a huge win that delivered on promises that had been made and work that had been done for generations. Usually, politicians would be claiming their share of the credit.

At a minimum, pro-life advocates should start by asking those who support abortion what constraints, if any, they might favor. No abortions after the first trimester? After the second? Where would they draw the line?

If we want to change the culture and talk about the absolute importance and essentiality of life, now is the moment. Everyone is focused on these questions. Staying silent in the face of the expected backlash from entrenched interests is a significant strategic error politically and inexcusable morally.

• *Michael McKenna, a columnist for The Washington Times, co-hosts "The Unregulated Podcast." He was most recently a deputy assistant to the president and deputy director of the Office of Legislative Affairs at the White House.*

Congress led by octogenarians stuck in Cold War mentality

Ukraine and the gerontocracy



McConnell Support for Ukraine Illustration by Greg Groesch/The Washington Times McConnell Support for Ukraine Illustration by ... more >

COMMENTARY

By Michael McKenna

Wednesday, August 16, 2023

OPINION:

The great Jonathan Martin recently wrote a story that lays bare all the pathologies of the Republican Party and the chasm that exists between its “leaders” and the voters.

Ostensibly, the article is about Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in twilight, and his quest to send more cash, an endless amount of cash, to Ukraine before wrapping up his Senate career. In reality, however, the article is about the distance between what representatives want and what voters want.

Perhaps the most illuminating quote came from Mr. McConnell, explaining the need to bring freshman Republican senators to hear directly from Europeans: “These were people who just faced the voters, heard plenty of arguments to the contrary [with respect to shipping cash to Ukraine] and needed to hear it from someone else other than just the people who sent them here.”

In other words, the Kentucky Republican wanted to make sure that senators heard the arguments for why we need to perpetuate European dependency on American taxpayers, indefinitely apparently, from Europeans themselves. American voters can be, you know, so parochial.

For those keeping score, those parochial Americans, whose opinions Mr. McConnell felt a need to counterbalance, have sent more money and resources to Ukraine than all of the nations of Europe combined.

No other action quite so neatly captures the dismissiveness of the political elites to average Americans as does sending the United States to Ukraine one dollar at a time.

The middle class has spent the last three years, or the last three decades for that matter, losing ground in all areas of their lives that matter — their kids' education, their personal economy, their safety, housing and energy prices, the deterioration of their families, neighborhoods, hometowns, bridges, highways, you name it.

In response, the political class gives us lectures on how we're not spending enough on defense or Ukraine. Then they propose sending \$25 billion more to Ukraine.

How much is enough? When will we know that we have given enough?

At what point will the gyrations of the Europeans — which have been going on for 1,500 years and will go on long after this latest kerfuffle is resolved and which George Washington himself warned us about — cease to cause certain Americans to dive headfirst into the nonsense?

The last two American presidencies have been consumed by relationships with a tiny, breakaway province of the now-defunct Soviet Union for no apparent reason.

Americans are well within their rights to ask why their leaders of both parties seem to care more about 40 million Ukrainians than 330 million Americans.

To those of a certain age, the world will always be about the long war between the United States and Russia. But we won that war. It is time to move on and recognize that the next thing we need to win is our looming conflict with a much more fearsome and difficult China.

The Europeans have lived under the umbrella of American military protection for almost 80 years. That's long enough. It is time for them to move out of the house and start paying rent.

What American voters see when they look at the Europeans are wealthy children who seem unwilling to take responsibility for their own lives, their own economy (the war in Ukraine has exposed the weakness of their approach to energy), and their own defense (only Poland and Britain spend the NATO-required 2% of their gross domestic product on national security).

How can anyone justify the U.S. subsidizing the Europeans?

They can't, so they don't try. Instead, we are subject to endless harangues by aging elites about how the Russians are the real threat to the United States and the world order.

That's equal parts sad and comical. The Russians can't even bring the smaller and poorer Ukrainians to heel, yet somehow, we are supposed to imagine that they can project enough force to threaten world peace.

At the same time, there has been bipartisan failure to take any meaningful action against the Chinese, who are busy building nuclear weapons and rockets to deliver them to places like Des Moines, Iowa, and Chicago in numbers that dwarf our nuclear forces. The same Congress that wants to send more cash to Ukraine can't even ban TikTok.

We are led by people who confuse nostalgia with strategic thought and who have less concern for Americans than they should. At some point in the not-too-distant future, that is going to be a problem.

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Power corrupts: Speech codes for universities is a dangerously subversive idea



Speech codes for universities and colleges illustration by Linas Garsys / The Washington Times
Speech codes for universities and colleges ... more >

COMMENTARY

By Michael McKenna
Wednesday, December 13, 2023

OPINION:

Here's what bothers me about the debate over the performance of the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at last week's congressional hearing: The Republicans, led by Rep. Elise Stefanik (Harvard 2006), seem intent on adding to the pathology of speech and conduct codes, rather than using this moment to destroy these monuments to privilege and the corrupting nature of power.

Indeed, Ms. Stefanik and others have demanded that university speech and conduct codes be amended and expanded, presumably to include provisions outlawing hatred of Jews or at least outlawing expressions of hatred of Jews. Ms. Stefanik has spent much of the last few days noting that the speech and conduct codes remain unchanged and do not yet include provisions precluding actions she would like precluded.

Such an approach is understandable. Having been the targets of these codes for years, those on the right now see an opportunity to place their political adversaries in a bad spot by placing some of their predilections under sanction.

Unfortunately, there are a couple of problems with that approach. First, as your mother probably mentioned to you, two wrongs do not make a right. Second, once the government gets involved in regulating speech — and make no mistake, Ms. Stefanik is the government, whether she is nominally on “your” side or not — it never stops at the obvious and the easy. It always expands, and it is always bad.

The notion that our universities — which at this point are either entirely or essentially quasi-governmental operations — should have speech codes is a dangerously subversive idea and has been since such codes first surfaced at places like Penn 35 years ago.

They have been an accelerant of social decay for decades, constraining our ability to engage in free public discourse. They have resulted in the silencing — if only temporary — of a constellation of people, including pretty much everyone on the political right.

Given the current moment, when their limitations are conspicuous and there is a genuine opportunity to geld them, no one should be in favor of expanding them, especially those who have taken an oath to uphold the Constitution.

But that's where the Republican Party is nowadays. It has become so marinated in the politics of grievance and vendetta — thanks mostly, but not entirely, to its current leader — that it is incapable of understanding that now is a moment to restore the First Amendment, not add to its corrosion.

Others see this as well. In response to Ms. Stefanik's offer to treat this as a moment for political retribution ("One down, two to go!"), a family member asked me: "What's wrong with these people?"

The unhappy answer, and the only truthful answer, is that power corrupts. It doesn't matter who you are. If you have enough leverage, you eventually want to decide what people should and shouldn't say, what people should and shouldn't do, and — most ominously — what people should and shouldn't think.

Limiting the range of acceptable thought is the actual purpose of speech and conduct codes and the final goal of those who would perpetuate them, like Ms. Stefanik.

The Republicans should understand this better than most and take this opportunity to deconstruct those codes, not enshrine in them as tributes to

our own sense of victimization.

• *Michael McKenna (Penn '85) is a contributing editor to The Washington Times.*

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