

Purging Heroes

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Poor old Pat Buchanan! He was on to something but I'm afraid he let it get away from him. Many of us who have been around for a while have been troubled by a recent trend in our culture to reinterpret the past through the lens of our current social norms. Thus, viewing Victorian era dramas through the prism of Twenty-first Century feminism, as is regularly done by the BBC and by Hollywood, can be disconcerting. I've found it easy enough to resist the recent denunciations of Jefferson, Madison and the other Founding Fathers as hypocrites and slave-owners by recalling that, nearly two centuries after the Founders did their thing, I, a white kid from the suburban north, went to a racially segregated college in the South, established in part with money from the slave owner George Washington, without so much as a thought or a peep of protest. We're all hypocrites. We are all formed by our times but we can at least try to keep the hypocrisy in check. For the most part, our Founding Fathers rose to a challenge and became better than what their environment had raised them to be.

I admit to a tendency to be tolerant of the failings of Jefferson because in addition to being the author of the Declaration of Independence and the founder of the University of Virginia, he was also the best American architect of our first century. I may also be subject to a strain of blind romanticism. Where many modern writers see him as a rapist of his slaves, I see something a little more nuanced in his fathering a number of children with the half-sister of his dead wife. In modern parlance, one might say it's OK to be with the one you love, whatever.

But back to Pat. Like an old man who has stumbled across a bottle of very good wine and after the first sip goes on to drain the bottle, becoming incomprehensible and offensive in the process, Pat just doesn't know where to stop. To err is human, to forgive divine. That makes Pat practically a saint. He venerates our heroes, warts and all. Venerating "heroes" or tearing them down, did not start or end with America. If Thomas Jefferson is reviled in certain circles today, it is nothing compared to the vilification he received while running for president. Pat, as a proud advocate of American exceptionalism, may not want to contemplate inferior cultures but the rewriting of history has gone on throughout history. Oliver Cromwell ran England for years and he was buried alongside kings and queens but it wasn't long before his body was dug up and dismembered. His head was displayed on a spike outside Westminster Abbey for the next forty years. Not his statue mind you, but his real head.

I realize that Pat is a Roman Catholic and that an integral part of Catholicism is the concept of forgiveness, usually granted in response to penitence, whether feigned or sincere, but Pat carries his Christian forgiveness beyond anything even the Pope would advocate. How far should we go with this? After WWII, one of the first things General MacArthur did was to strip the Emperor of his divinity. Our heroes, other than Christ of course, are not divine. They're human and therefore imperfect. Pat's celebration of all of America's movers and shakers, without concern for their imperfections, seems worthy of his faith, but while praising what he more or less describes as a tough bunch of bastards who built the country in all its glory, his appraisal seems to allow for no distinction

whatsoever between men of honor and fundamentally evil rogues.

Would he apply similar arguments to Germany and the USSR? Does he lament that there are so few monuments to the officials who steadfastly overcame logistical problems during the war to keep those trains running to Auschwitz? Are there insufficient monuments to Stalin, who heroically kept his empire intact throughout his lifetime?

Should Roger Taney's likeness be seen in Annapolis? To what end? Is there a plaque telling visiting children that the statue honors the fifth Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, most famous for decreeing that blacks were not, and could not be, citizens of the US and therefore had no rights which white people were bound to respect?

Should Nathan Bedford Forrest's likeness remain on display in Memphis? Forrest was a complex figure, the sort of larger than life figure that Hollywood likes to sanitize and turn into legends. However, is any reasonable civic purpose served by maintaining a large monument to a man who was a slave trader, who was thought to have conducted a massacre of hundreds of captured slaves and who was thought to be the first Grand Dragon of the KKK? Do we really need constant reminders of the dark side of our history? How about placing Dick Cheney's removed, decomposing and never fully functional heart on permanent display in the Smithsonian? I don't think we need any more memorials to horror.