

The collapse of leadership

William Lange

July 8, 2017

I'm writing this on the anniversary of possibly the most crucial action of the Civil War (or War of Rebellion, or War of Northern Aggression; we still haven't gotten over it, a century and a half later). It was the successful defense, at Gettysburg, of the far left of the Union Army line at Little Round Top by Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine. Tomorrow, the anniversary of Pickett's Charge will commemorate the so-called High Tide of the Confederacy, after which the South never again threatened the Union on its own territory. (As an aside, when Lincoln received word from General Meade that the Army of Northern Virginia had been driven from "our territory," he is said to have remarked, "It is all our territory!")

I mention this because the Battle of Gettysburg has always, for some reason, resonated solemnly in our house (whenever Mother and I are at the battlefield, I limp across that once-ghastly short mile toward the Union cannon mouths). Another reason is that General George Stannard and the 2nd Vermont Brigade were instrumental in repulsing the Confederate attack on that decisive third day. And last, it seems to me that our country is currently almost as divided in some ways as it was during the middle of the 19th century. Our representatives in Washington seem to be spending more time trying to outmaneuver each other and raise money than in tackling and trying to solve their constituents' problems. It's very troublesome.

It's hard not to lay the blame for this disintegration of civility and cooperation to the collapse of leadership. Many of us remember the slow, bloody decline of Yugoslavia into warring states, factions, and ethnicities after the death of its strongman leader, Josip Tito in 1980. Today it's but a nostalgic sigh among some elderly former Yugoslavs.

The United States at the moment finds itself in a similar situation: Neither major party has a leader around whom that party's traditional values can coalesce. Donald Trump occupies roughly the same position, and enjoys about as much fealty, as once did "mad" King Ludwig II of Bavaria (the similarities between Mar-a-Lago and Neuschwanstein are striking). On the other hand, who represents or leads the Democratic Party? Former President Obama can offer only post-valedictory remarks about what's happening. Hillary Clinton, after her humiliating defeat, has retreated, at least for the time being, into relative obscurity. Nancy Pelosi has become a victim of the same relentless denigration that so damaged Mrs. Clinton. Chuck Schumer, the minority leader, has been reduced to the role of chief strategist in charge of thwarting Republican legislative efforts. And Bernie Sanders, even though he's a minimal threat as a potential presidential candidate in 2020, can't even get an invitation to the party. He's relegated to the role

of crazy uncle at a reunion. Elizabeth Warren says many of the right things, but her critics play whack-a-mole with her every time she sticks her head up.

The Democratic Party of my youth, for which, in my 20s, I abandoned the conservative suits of the right, enjoyed a sort of raffish, blue-collar, common-man image. As a union man myself (Laborers and Hod-Carriers), and a devotee of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the Almanac Singers, I felt an instinctive brotherhood with working folks, downtrodden immigrants, and government intervention to help the struggling, broke, and otherwise distressed. After a Republican committeeman declined to forward my application for a state job because I'd registered Independent, the die was cast, and I was gone. But the brotherhood I joined? As Jim Jeffords said once of the Republican Party, it's left me. And in the last election, it ran a millionaire.

Hillary Clinton got my vote because the alternative was unthinkable. But I must admit that I'm a bit miffed with her. Wellesley College may be a lovely place, and the young ladies who hand out orange wedges to passing Boston marathoners are lovely; but the college has never produced cheerleaders worth a damn. I e-mailed Hillary several times offering to give her a few tips on how to address the putative base of the party — she was at her worst when she shouted and raised her fist to rally the faithful — but she never even responded. So the devil with her. It turns out, according to a Cato Institute poll, that 25 percent of Trump voters were actually voting against her. Am I being Pollyannish, or is there an opportunity here?

Yes, of course there is. But there's not a lot of time to take advantage of it. Think of a party consolidating the way freezing water becomes ice: One hexagonal crystal attracts others, and the others attract more. They expand as they freeze, and soon you can drive a truck over them. But there has to be that first molecule freezing to attract and enable the others, until they are one structure.

Shakespeare, as usual, has a comment on what seems to have happened to the Democrats: Lowliness is young ambition's ladder, whereto the climber-upward turns his face; but when he once attains the upmost round, he then unto the ladder turns his back, looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees by which he did ascend. We should remind them that Bernie managed to fund a credible campaign with the gifts of small donors, and that they needn't seem to be beholden to millionaire supporters; that they need to advance concrete proposals — not just opposition to the Republicans in the EPA, Energy, and Education — that restore the hope of progress to the less able and less fortunate among us; that single-payer health care is in our future; that free state college education be available to every qualified person; and that there's a young fellow in the current Congress who bears watching. He's Joe Kennedy, a great-nephew of JFK, Stanford/Harvard lawyer, represents the Fourth District of Massachusetts, fluent in Spanish and in another important language— the long-forgotten message of compassionate government. I like this kid!