

THE WENATCHEE WORLD

The outrage cycle spins on

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After mostly staying off Facebook over the holidays, I think I'll pop back on there to see what I've missed. Join me, won't you?

Oh, look, a story posted on The World's Facebook feed: "Board changes school name to Lee Elementary". Let's just take a quick peek at the reader comments. I bet they're thoughtful.

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Oh.

A brief summary of the comments:

Name-calling. So much name-calling.

Disdain lobbed at Eastmont School Board members for being a bunch of spineless liberals.

A smattering of slightly confused debate about Civil War history.

Memes.

Outrage about the cost of the name change (From Robert E. Lee Elementary to Lee Elementary) and who will pay for it. (Putting the issue on the general election ballot next year, as the board had wanted, would have cost about \$10,000. That's in addition to the millions of dollars in lost investment that the Wenatchee Valley Chamber of Commerce estimated a vote could have cost the community. To drop the "Robert E." from the school name will have minimal costs, spread out over time. The school will use its current stationery until it runs out, for example.)

Many commenters expressed disgust over a decision they say was pushed upon locals by activist outsiders, made in the interest of political correctness.

Political correctness is a term that has been wielded as a broad-brush insult by the right for decades. This president uses the term as a pejorative to describe all that is wrong with the left, as short-hand for the absurd, the hypersensitive.

And it's easy to see his point. Think of all those high-profile news items about PC culture run amok: campus radicalism at Berkeley and Evergreen, the nonsensical decision ESPN made back in August when it pulled broadcaster Robert Lee from calling a University of Virginia football game. Think of all those gag-inducing terms that are associated with the politically correct crowd, like "trigger warnings" and "microaggressions." If political correctness were a person,

you just know he'd be that stiff, self-righteous guy at the party who takes himself way too seriously and doesn't get the joke.

But being politically correct doesn't have to mean acting in ludicrous, overly sensitive ways. It doesn't have to mean calling someone a racist because they disagree with you. It can mean simply being tolerant of others and open to their opinions, acknowledging that while you might not be offended by the school name, other people might be.

Political correctness is easy to make fun of, but it has served as a guidepost on our nation's path to progress. It's why a public figure cannot get away with mocking a disabled person, or taunting the parents of fallen soldiers, or characterizing Mexican immigrants as rapists. (Well, most public figures, anyway.)

And while they would never, ever call themselves politically correct, conservatives are almost as skilled as liberals at policing language and ideas they disagree with.

As Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, wrote in the Washington Post: "...in the aftermath of 9/11 and the run-up to the Iraq War, David Frum labeled dissenters as anti-American. ... The French government's opposition to the invasion of Iraq prompted Congress to rename French fries as 'freedom fries' in congressional cafeterias ... When the Dixie Chicks opposed the Iraq War, many stations pulled the group's music from the air so as not to 'trigger' listeners. Fans destroyed Dixie Chicks albums in grotesque public demonstrations. The radio became a safe space.

"More recently, 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat and then knelt for the national anthem to protest police brutality. Tomi Lahren, host of 'Final Thoughts,' gave an incoherent rant about soldiers dying for Kaepernick's right to speak so, therefore, he should shut up and stand for the national anthem. Some fans even burned their Kaepernick jerseys in protest. Others said Kaepernick should 'get the hell out' if he doesn't love America."

I would add to that list of examples the personality cult of Robert E. Lee that is apparently in vogue on the right these days, part of a broader trend to whitewash the Confederate cause. Question the nobility of Gen. Lee or the worthiness of his name for a public school and you are labeled with that term: politically correct.

There are worse things to be called, I suppose.