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It's Easy to Feel Righteous in the Trump Era. Liberals, Beware.

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It was easy for my generation of baby boomer liberals to be humble, because we had much to be humble about.

Many on the left had erred on what was perhaps the most important issue of the 20th century, global totalitarianism: Too many had been soft on Soviet Communism or Chinese Maoism. When you see well-meaning people on your side who were catastrophically wrong about profound moral and political issues, humility comes more easily.

These days, however, many conservatives are so ridiculous that I fear they are robbing us liberals of that well-earned humility.

I wonder if it isn't more difficult for younger liberals to feel appropriate self-doubt after seeing conservatives frolic decade after decade on the wrong side of history. If you're an American under 50, you remember many conservatives championing the Iraq war, refusing to tackle AIDS, denouncing gay rights, shrugging at racism, claiming that tax cuts for the wealthy would pay for themselves, opposing Obamacare, hailing Donald Trump, scoffing at Covid-19, resisting vaccinations and even condoning an insurrection at the United States Capitol.

There have of course been Republicans who, at great cost to their careers, stood up to Trump or took other principled stands. Their political courage is an example for all.

But think about what we've seen in just the past few days. Trump was indicted for a second time. Fox News carried a hallucinatory chyron about President Biden as a "wannabe dictator." House Republicans tried to fine Representative Adam Schiff \$16 million, in effect for investigating Trump. And House Speaker Kevin McCarthy defended Trump's practice of keeping classified documents in a bathroom by saying, "A bathroom door locks."

Some on the right come across as money-grubbing opportunists. Representative Elise Stefanik, chair of the House Republican Conference, sent out an email to raise money for "our official Trump Defense Fund," as HuffPost reported, but it appears that 99 percent of donations would go to her and only 1 percent to Trump. Plus, unless donors noticed a box and unchecked it, they would apparently be billed for recurring monthly donations.

I fear that liberals react to all this by inflating with self-righteousness. One lesson of history — and of ancient Greek playwrights like Aeschylus — is that it's dangerous to become too full of yourself. Just ask Oedipus. (But hurry, because there are progressive calls to cancel classics.)

So today, with conservatives shorn of credibility, we need a Greek chorus to hold us accountable and force us to face unpleasant facts.

Consider that three of the four states with the highest rates of unsheltered homelessness — California, Hawaii and Oregon — are all run by Democrats. Look up and down the cities of the West Coast — where liberals reign — and it's impossible to celebrate a triumph of good governance. We may have great values, but we don't always have great outcomes.

During the Covid pandemic, we mocked Republicans for ignoring science and resisting vaccinations. Fair enough. But Democrats too often also ignored science and kept schools closed longer than necessary, with devastating consequences for some of America's most marginalized children. Some kids in Republican states won't be able to read books in school libraries about gender or race because of right-wing censorship, and some kids in Democratic states won't be able to read them because they fell behind or dropped out during school closings.

We on the left are outraged by Republican policies on reproductive health, as we should be — but it's also worth noting that it's a red state, Alabama, that is now undertaking a campaign to end cervical cancer. Blue states would save lives if they followed Alabama on that one.

The left's self-righteousness has also resulted in streaks of intolerance, such as blocking conservative speakers on university campuses and perpetuating stereotypes of evangelical Christians (one of the few groups on many campuses it's considered acceptable to mock).

Overzealous liberals regularly undermine their own causes. Democrats' calls for defunding the police may have helped Republicans win seats in the House and Senate — just as some leftists who voted for Jill Stein in 2016 may have helped put Trump in the White House, as Ralph Nader voters in 2000 put George W. Bush in the White House.

I also worry that the liberal penchant for renaming things is counterproductive. When we employ terms like "Latinx" and "A.A.P.I." or we fret that it is offensive to refer to "the French" or "the college-educated" or we cite "people with uteruses" rather than "women," the result is meant to be inclusive but actually leaves many Americans feeling bewildered and excluded. The way to win elections is to engage voters rather than wag fingers at them.

Slogans can't replace evidence-based policymaking that understands trade-offs and embraces nuances. It's easy to say housing is a human right, but that doesn't get anyone into a home.

My guess is that we liberals will continue to do silly things from time to time and that our silliness will be directly proportional to our smugness. If conservatives won't let us earn humility the traditional way — by periodically discovering we're the stupidest people in the room — then we'll have to sharpen our ears for a Greek chorus warning us of the risk of our own fallibility in a complex world.

Otherwise, the whole room gets stupider and stupider.

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