



Ross K. Baker: Democrats foolishly purge heroes

August 10, 2015

By applying today's standards, Presidents Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson & FDR get the boot.

The Democratic Party has turned into the Church of Perpetual Repentance. The occasion is the annual Jefferson-Jackson dinners, long held by Democrats in each state to raise money and fire up the troops. The name honors Thomas Jefferson, who founded the party, and Andrew Jackson, who redefined it by wresting control from the hands of the East Coast oligarchy that had come to dominate it.

But these credentials are evidently not strong enough to retain their names at the party events in Missouri, Connecticut, Georgia and others sure to follow. Jefferson, as all schoolchildren know, was a slaveholder, and Jackson was a Native American-slaughtering apologist for the enslavement of African Americans.

This action follows hard on the heels of the demotion of the Confederate battle flag to justifiable exile in dusty museums. But Jefferson and Jackson are not the rebel flag, a symbol of treason as well as slavery. True, neither Jefferson nor Jackson could rise above prejudices of their day, but they are too important as historical figures and central to the evolution of the Democratic Party to be banished and, by implication, disgraced.

Who could possibly get through the vetting process of the Democratic activists passionate about purging the party of any individual who could possibly be offensive to anyone? Franklin Roosevelt, who presided over the internment of Japanese Americans? Harry Truman, who used the atomic bomb on civilians? Woodrow Wilson, who acclaimed D.W. Griffith's racist *Birth of a Nation* movie at a White House screening? They would end up with admirable but obscure figures who, perhaps, deserved to be honored.

Any prominent figure in 19th-century American politics would be unlikely to earn naming rights. Even "the Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln, who happened to be a Republican, was a strong supporter of the American Colonization Society belief that advocated the "repatriation" of African Americans to a spot on the coast of West Africa that was not native to most of them. He also favored sending black Americans to Central America.

Who, by our contemporary lofty standards, is unblemished? Perhaps a handful of virtuous Quakers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey who abhorred slavery as a principal tenet of their faith or, perhaps, Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, who was beaten senseless on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1856 by a Southerner enraged at Sumner's eloquent tirades against slavery. Sorry, Sumner was also a Republican.

There is an awkward term used in academic circles to describe the application of contemporary moral standards to people who lived long ago. It's called "presentism," and it mercilessly subjects history and historical figures to contemporary social enlightenment. It is smug and self-satisfied and pats itself on the back for its own high-mindedness, but it is ignorant of context and erects impossibly high obstacles to which virtually no major figure can measure up.

Certainly no one who had to endure the give-and-take of politics and the chore of dealing with people with whom they did not agree. Even the incomparable George Washington owned slaves. Perhaps the renaming of our capital should be the next target of the party leaders in the states where this cleansing ritual is taking place.

The only prominent Americans of the 19th century with entirely clean hands in the matter of slavery are probably Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. And they were almost certainly not associated in any way with the Democratic Party, which, let's face it, was then the party of slavery.

Baker is the distinguished professor of political science at Rutgers University and a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.