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The PCA in a Negative World

If Aaron Renn is right, conservative Protestants in the United States have entered into a different world, what he calls a “negative” one, in which many perceive Christianity as an undesirable or unwelcome presence in society. He writes (“The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” *First Things*, Feb. 2022) this “negative world” began in 2014 and “expressly repudiates” Christian morality. That ethic is a threat to “the public good” and those who subscribe to Christian morality “violate the secular moral order.”

This period, 2014 to the present, follows two other periods. The first, “Positive World,” characterized American society prior to 1994. Christian norms still dominated America’s moral order and being a Christian enhanced one’s status. This might explain why Bill Clinton posed for

cameras, with Bible in hand, while going to church. Between 1994 and 2014, Renn argues, America transitioned to the “Neutral World.” Being a Christian was not necessarily positive but neither did it hurt a person’s status. At the same time, the leaders of American institutions accepted Christian moral norms as part of the nation’s heritage even if they themselves did not actively support or follow them.

This “neutral” period was also when the PCA adopted its kinder, gentler posture. Its leaders wanted to correct for some of the fundamentalist impulses that were present at the denomination’s 1973 founding. They also hoped to fashion a “broadening” Presbyterian church to accommodate the obvious diversity – generational, regional, doctrinal – in the denomination. This was precisely the period that Tim Keller and John Frame penned fairly influential essays about Presbyterians, diversity, controversy, and what to do about it. In retrospect, they did not prepare their peers and colleagues in the PCA for the world after 2014.

FRAME’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE festschrift for Alister E. McGrath (of all places!), “Machen’s Warrior Children,” (2003) has much of the feel of “neutral world” evangelicalism. He starts with Machen as more or less the touchstone for conservative Reformed Protestantism in the United States. Frame summarizes Machen’s writing pretty much in passing before observing the outsized influence Westminster Seminary had on German Reformed (RCUS), individual pastors in Congregational, Independent, and Anglican churches,

not to mention the high regard that the Christian Reformed Church, the Covenanters, and the Associate Reformed had for Machen and the seminary he founded. And then, in Frame’s narrative, Machen’s heirs started to contend against each other or with peripheral doctrines and the Machen movement lost its luster.

TO HIS CREDIT, FRAME REJECTS liberalism explicitly even as he lauds diversity in the church. “There are some theological issues that really are matters of life and death for the church,” he writes. He added that the state of affairs in the PCUSA with debates over the ordination of homosexuals and “biblical standards of sexual fidelity and chastity were “outrageous” (a point that could well step on a few toes in the current controversy over Side-B Christians). But Frame also speculated that the theological diversity of conservative Presbyterianism in Machen’s day was likely “cultivated intentionally.” That diversity, Frame implies, was a factor in Westminster’s influence outside narrowly Orthodox Presbyterian networks. This leads to Frame’s final thought – an appeal to Tim Keller’s advice that Reformed Christians needed to move from an “exclusive focus” on doctrine to “a vision” that includes “piety, evangelistic outreach, and missions of mercy.”

Downplaying the need for controversy evoked the sense of Renn’s “neutral world.” Contending against error was less advisable than, to use the language of Pope Francis, “coming along side” the world outside the church.

KELLER’S ESSAY SEVEN YEARS LATER, “What’s So Great about the PCA?” echoes Frame’s assessment of

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controversy but his story line more or less ends where the professor's begins. Keller walks readers through, not the post-Machen world, but the Presbyterian propensity for controversy even before the 1920s. This leads Keller to describe the 18th-century split between Old and New Side Presbyterians (anti- and pro-revival) and the 19th-century division between Old and New School Presbyterian (anti- and pro-revival – anyone see a pattern here?).

Keller goes on, thanks to his ability to draw on all the reading he does, somewhat abruptly to add the categories of pietist, culturalist, and doctrinalist – typically attributed to the world of Dutch Reformed more than American Presbyterians – to assess the PCA circa

2010. The denomination has all the elements. These groups tend to approach issues before the church differently and so conflict results. A “big tent” sets the PCA up for controversy. But this is not a bug. It's a feature. Doctrinalists can be smug, pietists can be more pragmatic than principled, and culturalists can let justice erode orthodoxy (he did actually write that in 2010). But splitting or pruning the church was not advisable because the church needs all of the emphases since they are all part of a healthy church and are genuine parts of the Reformed tradition.

The New York City pastor concludes that the PCA needed all the parts of its own and American Presbyterian history. He does not spend much time on liberalism, though he does concede that the Social Gospel developed out of New School Presbyterian concerns for social justice. The PCA, for Keller, is like a body. Doctrinalists are like “white corpuscles” and pietists and culturalists are like “red corpuscles.” Too many white cells and you get leukemia; too many red cells and you get AIDS.

KELLER'S ATTEMPT WAS TO maintain unity in the face of the PCA's diversity.

But when he took the temperature of the denomination most recently, for *ByFaith Magazine*, (“What's Happening in the PCA?” – a phrase more suggestive of worry than of the 1960s black comedian, Flip Wilson's “the church of what's happening now”). The alarming aspect for Keller is a new narrative that shifts from the Old and New-Side/School splits or the three wings of the church (doctrine, piety, culture) to a simple binary – conservative versus liberal. But to divide the church into the strict, conservative side, those “valiant for truth” against the

“missional” or “evangelical” side that “wants to be popular with the culture” is wrong. Keller's main reason for rejecting this interpretation is that it is uncharitable. Christians should give each other the benefit of the doubt instead of thinking the worst of those on the other side.

For those who might employ Renn's “negative world” to explain the polarization of the PCA as an outworking of the political fragmentation of the United States, Keller is equally unpersuaded. Keller insists that the PCA is conservative since it is filled with ministers who believe “women should not be ordained elders,” “in the inerrancy of Scripture,” “some people are predestined from all eternity to be damned,” “people are going to hell if they don't believe savingly in Jesus,” “homosexual practice and desire are sin,” “we are all descended from a real, specially created Adam and Eve.” He lets readers know, as well, that anyone living in New York City who believes these truths, is not progressive but definitely conservative.

Whether Keller acknowledged it or not, by saying the PCA is not progressive but conservative, he used the very sort of binary categories that go with Renn's “negative world.” The PCA may have had the luxury of once being invigorated by its diversity, but in the new situation, the communion now stands out like a sore conservative thumb even as many of its leaders are used to using those digits for “two thumbs up.”

WHAT DOES NOT SEEM TO BE A possibility for Frame and Keller is that conservative Presbyterianism has existed in a negative world for the better part of a century. The “positive world” that Renn described as prevailing before 1994 did regard Christianity as an asset in making the world a better place. This also meant that mainline Protestants looked aside from doctrinal and polity considerations to ways in which they could cooperate to retain a Christian

America (evangelicals did the same by downplaying denominational differences). The era of Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* was not simply the one where theologians abandoned biblical inerrancy or questioned the creation narratives of Genesis. It was actually one in which greater acceptance of Christian morality and piety would also spread greater justice and freedom. It was the period when ecumenism and the Social Gospel went hand in hand in protecting America as a Christian nation.

A belief in progress had replaced a sense of limits. According to Machen, "During the past century a profound spiritual change has been produced in the whole thought and life of the world." He compared it to paganism, not as a "term of reproach" since paganism, as the Greeks practiced it, could be "glorious." What Machen meant was "a view of life which finds its ideal simply in a healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties." In the current idiom, such an outlook might coincide with cheerleading for "the city." This paganism infected the pulpit, Machen alleged, when preachers said things like "You men are very good and very self-sacrificing, and we take pleasure in revealing your goodness to you. Now, since you are so good, you will probably be interested in Christianity, especially in the life of Jesus, which we believe is good enough even for you." This preaching was obviously more attractive than the cross. Still, it was useless "to call the righteous to repentance."

WITH THAT KIND OF ARC-BENDS-toward-justice notion dominating elite institutions, including the mainline churches, Machen put on his battle fatigues. He was fighting more than liberalism but the capitulation of the churches to easy, shallow, and non-Christian notions of goodness, hope, and improvement. Was this battle any more unusual than other controversies in the history of Christianity? Machen didn't

think so because "every true revival is born in controversy, and leads to more controversy." Machen also disputed calls to love (like Keller's) especially if the caller appealed to 1 Cor 13. "That hymn to Christian love," Machen reminded, "is in the midst of a great polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had been opposed to controversy with error in the church."

TO CLAIM THAT FRAME AND KELLER failed to appreciate Machen's point about controversy may go too far. But critics can still wonder about their failure to provide better leadership and arguments for Presbyterians who admired them and read their books eagerly. Did they think they were smarter than others? Did they really consider their judgments of the cultural and ecclesiastical context to be sounder? They spent much of their career during a period of evangelical scholarship in which Machen was often dismissed as a bit wound up and over zealous in his pursuit of the purity of the church. They may not have paid as much attention to Machen as they might have – despite their connections to the very seminary Machen founded.

Whatever the reason, they did not prepare the PCA very well for the situation in which it now ministers, from what to do with progressives in its ministerial ranks to how to maintain its thought-leading influence in the echelons of American society (ahem).

DGH

SC88

What's In a Denominational Name?

Today, neither the Orthodox Presbyterian Church nor the Presbyterian Church in America bear their first chosen names. Different as the two denominations are, the reasons for their name changes and even their slates of rejected names are quite similar. And the names—those chosen and those passed over—say a good bit about the aspirations and outlooks of the two churches at the tumultuous times of their formation.

The OPC formed on June 11, 1936 when 34 ministers, 17 ruling elders, and 79 laymen met in Philadelphia to constitute the new church as the Presbyterian Church of America. This founding few left the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), the rapidly-liberalizing Northern mainline church, with their leader J. Gresham Machen, whose 1935 conviction was upheld by the 1936 PCUSA General Assembly. Among Machen's crimes (besides being irritatingly effective at pointing out the PCUSA's slide into unbelief) was his role in an independent missions board meant to support only orthodox missionaries.

Though the number of "orthodox" ministers and churches that left the PCUSA with Machen was small, their vision and hopes were large, thus the OPC's first chosen name was the Presbyterian Church of America.

THE FLEDGLING ASSEMBLY (WHOSE full number would have fit into two or three buses) proclaimed in their Act of Association:

In order to continue what we believe to be the true spiritual succession of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which we hold to have been abandoned by the present organization of that body, and to make clear to all the world that we have no connection with the organization bearing that name...do hereby associate ourselves together with all Christian people who do and will adhere to us, in a body to be known and styled as the Presbyterian Church of America.

Was the “of” chosen because of some fancy that the eventual OPC was in fact the Only Presbyterian Church for the USA? Probably not, but it must indicate...something. Maybe it was chosen to be as close to their progenitor’s name as possible while still providing differentiation.

At any rate, the first PCA did not remain so denominated for long. Their wayward strumpet of a “mother” church was then well supplied with lawyers, politicians, movers, and shakers so there were plenty of suits ready to swing into action when the PCUSA decided that a tiny church with the words “Presbyterian,” “Church,” and “America” in their name threatened their mammoth brand. The legal letters began to fly and the tiny, cash-strapped PCofA had to give in.

A GENERAL ASSEMBLY (THE FIRST OF two in 1939) was called expressly for the purpose of re-denominating the three-year-old church. The minutes disclose an astonishing slate of proposed noms d’eglise:

The following names were suggested: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, The Presbyterian and Reformed Church of America, "The American Pres. Church, The Presbyterian Church of Christ, The Protestant Presbyterian Church of America, The Seceding Presbyterian Church (of America), The Free

Presbyterian Church of America, The True Presbyterian Church of the World, The American Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

It took at least four ballots to finally choose The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a name that seemed to guarantee that the church would forever be known as both odd and highly doctrinal. Who can but regret that The True Presbyterian Church of the World was not chosen? Such a name might have at least helped the OPC avoid their several failed flirtations with church union. And did rejection of The Evangelical Presbyterian Church presage the OPC’s “sideline” understanding of itself as a pilgrim church? Interestingly, that name was adopted in 1961 by an offshoot of the OPC’s early fundamentalist offshoot (the Bible Presbyterian Church) and by other more patient (though unrelated) mainline refugees in 1981.

The loss of their founder (Machen died barely six months into the church’s life), the loss of church property (for most), and the loss of their first chosen name might have demoralized the infant communion—yet they persisted.

IN 1973 THE OPC’S SOUTHERN cousins (wearing wide ties and earth-tone polyester) left another expression of liberalizing mainline presbyterianism, the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This church’s conservatives were used to nice things, respectability, and cultural influence, and their first chosen name for a continuing church reflected their great expectations: The National Presbyterian Church. But the mainline struck again, though not in the form of a denomination but of a local mainline congregation. And quite a locality it was. The ultra-modern National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC (the cornerstone of which was laid by former President Eisenhower on October 14, 1967) was

a sort of last gasp of truly Christian nationalist pretensions. And it was considered the flagship church of the clunkily named Northern mainline body, The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), later to join with the PCUS to form the current PCUSA. The local church was jealous for its name, and they, too, could afford great lawyers.

One of the first actions of the National Presbyterian Church’s second assembly (1974) was to find a new name and thus lose the unwelcome legal troubles. The list of proposed names was a wonder to behold:

1. National Reformed Presbyterian Church
2. The Presbyterian Church of America
3. International Presbyterian Church
4. Vanguard Presbyterian Church
5. Presbyterian Church in America
6. Presbyterian National Church
7. Historic Presbyterian Church
8. Evangelical Presbyterian Church
9. International Reformed Presbyterian Church
10. Presbyterian Church of the Covenant
11. Nationwide Presbyterian Church
12. Continuing Presbyterian Church
13. National Continuing Presbyterian Church
14. American Presbyterian Church
15. Christian Presbyterian Church
16. Presbyterian Church of Jesus Christ
17. Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States

SOME LOOKED BACK, SOME LOOKED forward, a few were identical to names on earlier OPC lists, many were quite American or national. Conspicuous by its absence was the term “Southern.” The new denomination’s expansive vision was obvious—they would be a regional church no more.

On Tuesday evening (the assembly’s first day) the name National Reformed Presbyterian Church was chosen. The year-old church had a new name by the addition of only one word. The church’s

legal counsel was immediately tasked with clearing the new name with the offended Washington, DC congregation.

The next morning—either because of communication with the DC church or because of second thoughts—the Rev. Kennedy Smartt moved that the name be reconsidered. A gang of eight names included a few that were more international or mission-oriented than national:

Presbyterian Church in America
The Presbyterian Church
International Presbyterian Church
Grace Presbyterian Church
Mission Presbyterian Church
National Reformed Presbyterian Church
American Presbyterian Church
Presbyterian Church of the Americas

THE ASSEMBLY OVERWHELMINGLY selected Presbyterian Church in America—a name very close to the OPC’s original name but with the all-important “in” rather than “of,” reflecting the Southern church’s spirituality-of-the-church convictions. By the end of its second assembly the church was on its third name, but this one would stick.

So what is in a church name? Maybe a little, maybe a lot. The old saw says that seeing the sausage made is not a good idea. Seeing it made quickly and under duress may be an even more unpleasant proposition. Ultimately though, the last names chosen for the OPC and the PCA are probably better than their first. And the tortuous church-naming process the two bodies endured offers a warning to any would-be splitters or leavers: choosing (and keeping) a new denominational name may be harder than anyone expects. And think of all the stationery that might have to be thrown away!

Brad Isbell

SC88

Old Side Presbyterians and the Ordinary Means

In his marvelous biography, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale, 2003), George Marsden writes, “On Wednesday morning, January 20, 1742, Sarah Edwards was enraptured by a spiritual ecstasy that continued for more than two weeks. Repeatedly she was physically overwhelmed by her spiritual raptures, sometimes leaping involuntarily to praise God and more often so overcome by joys and transports that she collapsed physically.” He continues to describe similar phenomena, e.g., she would become “so overcome by a vision of heaven that she lost her bodily strength.” She would “swoon” at the hymns of Isaac Watts and come to feel that she had been “swallowed up in God.” Her husband believed these to be genuine works of God and he was not alone. Marsden writes that such occurrences were commonplace in the First Great Awakening (hereafter, 1GA).

Amidst all the excitement and chaos associated with 1GA there was another much quieter, much maligned approach to Reformed theology, piety, and practice. It is known as the Old Side. I say maligned because one historian entitled his chapter on the movement, if it should be called that, “The Withered Branch.”

PERHAPS THE MOST NOTABLE representative of the Old Side was John Thomson (c. 1690–1753). If you have not heard of Thomson you are not alone. In a way it is fitting that most have never heard of the ordinary, orthodox, confessional

Reformed ministers who were serving Christ, preaching the law and the gospel, administering the sacraments, and visiting the sick during the 1GA. That is the nature of confessional Reformed theology, piety, and practice. It goes about its business not attracting attention to itself or to unusual phenomena, which Edwards and the other revivalists believed to be manifestations of the Spirit, but by pointing their flock and others to Christ and to his grace and mercy. By contrast, Edwards was so convinced that Sarah’s swooning was a work of the Spirit that he warned critics not to quench the Spirit and he warned them against committing the unpardonable sin. Indeed, both Edwards and Gilbert Tennent had charged that their critics were unregenerate.

Thomson preached and catechized his congregation with the hope and expectation that the same Holy Spirit who was causing Sarah to swoon and swoon would work quietly, mysteriously, and sovereignly to bring his elect to new life, true faith, and through faith, to union with Christ and adoption as sons. He was conducting what has come to be known, in distinction from the new measures of the 19th century, and the contemporary worship of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as an “ordinary means” ministry.

INDEED, THE VERY NOTION OF AN “ordinary means” ministry has become so exceptional, even in conservative Presbyterian and Reformed circles, that it requires whole volumes to explain it except there are not many volumes on “ordinary means” ministry. Mike Horton’s volume *Ordinary* (Zondervan, 2014) and D. G. Hart’s *Lost Soul* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) come to mind (there was once an “Ordinary Means” podcast, now defunct) and there are other related titles but one is struck

by the relative paucity. There are, however, hundreds of books on revival—how to have a revival, why we are not having a revival, what a real revival looks like, when the next revival is coming etc. *ad infinitum*.

This manifest imbalance of interest and consideration is all the more striking when we consider how the biblical writers themselves speak about the life and ministry of the church.

Where exactly, read in context, would one go in the New Testament to find instruction on leading one to expect revival or on how to have a revival? In contrast it is easy to see why Calvin wrote at such length about the means by which the Spirit ordinarily operates in the elect (e.g., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4) or the Westminster Divines confessed the “due use of ordinary means” in the Westminster Confession of Faith, (1.7).

The Divines thought of three means of grace: Word, sacrament, and prayer (WCF, 14.1). Shorter Catechism 88 asks “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?” The answer is:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

PAUL INSTRUCTED TIMOTHY TO “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and

wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim 4:2–5).

SOMETIMES THE MINISTRY OF THE Word will be in fashion and sometimes not. Whatever the season, the minister’s vocation does not change. He is to announce the gospel and thereby fulfill his ministry. For Paul, the preaching of the word is ordinary because it is ordained. It is the thing through which the Spirit operates to bring the elect to new life (Rom 10:17).

We expect the sacraments (Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion) to be among those things through which the Lord operates to confirm his promises to us from Acts 2:42: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Luke refers here to what we confess as the “communion of the saints,” the sacraments, and public worship. This is why the Heidelberg Catechism says that it is through the “preaching of the holy gospel” that the Spirit creates faith in us, and it is through the “use of the holy sacraments” that he confirms it.

The original marginal proof texts in the Heidelberg are “Rom 6” and “Gal 3.” In Romans 6:3–4 Paul wrote, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” The reference in Galatians 3 is certainly v. 27, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” These are

promises to believers. According to the Reformed (contra all sacerdotalists) baptism does not create realities but it does signify and seal them to believers. In baptism we are identified with Christ and by faith believers receive what the sacrament signifies. Baptism and the Supper are tangible expressions of the gospel promise. They are instituted by Christ but swooning is not.

WHEN LUKE WROTE “THE PRAYERS” IN Acts 2:42 he was thinking, in the first instance, of the public prayers offered in corporate worship. We have a fair idea of New Testament worship because of their adaptation of the synagogue liturgy. Corporate prayer was an essential part of the synagogue service. We know from early post-Apostolic records (e.g., Didache, Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan, and Justin Martyr’s comments) that corporate prayer was a part of early Christian worship. We know clearly from Scripture itself that corporate prayer was essential to public worship and the communion of the saints. Paul explained: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:1–2). Peter instructed the congregations in Asia Minor to be “casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet 4:7). John reminded suffering Christians that “the prayers of all the saints” are on “the golden altar before the throne” (Rev 8:3). This is the apostolic and early Christian pattern.

If the traditional story about the Montanists is correct (which some scholars doubt) they scandalized the early post-Apostolic church by seeking the extraordinary, instead of merely looking to Christ and trusting in the Spirit to operate quietly and

powerfully through the due use of ordinary means. Among the Corinthians the very existence of the apostolic-era gifts arguably became a headache for Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 14:21). Consider how much time he had to spend instructing them how to use them. Paul came preaching Christ crucified, because he was a theologian of the cross but because they were theologians of glory, they were fascinated by signs, wonders, and power (1 Cor 2–4; 13:1; 14:1; 2 Cor 1–12). Remarkably, pastors were still trying to wean the Corinthians from the theology of glory 70 years later. Edwards and Tennent were, at times, also theologians of glory but confessional Reformed Christians ought to be theologians of the cross satisfied with the due use of ordinary means. The mound of literature on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalists is impressive. Meanwhile John Thomson, who was a theologian of the cross and a mere minister of the means of grace, lies mostly forgotten. Thomson chose the good portion (Luke 10:42).

R. Scott Clark

SC88

39 Alexander Hall

All Law, No Gospel

America has a moralism problem and its churches are not doing enough to counteract it. The standards for morality have never been higher. Nor have they been so unstable – an ordinary remark today could next week cost you a week or more in the proverbial stocks of “cancel culture.” Either way, America is not suffering from moral relativism. It is rather captive to moral calculation. In the nation’s foreign policy, notions of

national interest or balance of power must bend the knee to the United States bending the arc of world affairs to the norm of what is righteous and just.

EVEN BEFORE THE SOLDIERS OF justice activism landed (social justice warriors is so tired), left-of-center Progressives could praise the United States for being on the right (read moral) side of debates and events. In 2013, Aaron Sorkin penned these words for his “Newsroom” (HBO) character, Will McAvoy (played by Michigan’s own Jeff Daniels). Of course, on the grounds by which conservatives calculate American greatness, Sorkin was fashionably negative:

[T]here is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're seventh in literacy, twenty-seventh in math, twenty-second in science, forty-ninth in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, third in median household income, number four in labor force, and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies.

But when it came to America’s proud past, McAvoy sounded a very different note and national wholesomeness was its organizing theme:

We sure used to be [great]. We stood up for what was right! We fought for moral reasons, we passed and struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared

about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, and we acted like men. We aspired to intelligence; we didn't belittle it; it didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't scare so easy. And we were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men, men who were revered. The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one—America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.

Lest it miss anyone, this was three years before the Trump presidency and MAGA merch. Sorkin’s script shows that MAGA was not an alien force in national life. It was the norm.

One hundred years before “Newsroom” aired on HBO, H. L. Mencken also noticed that moralism was a defining trait of American culture. It was synonymous with both Calvinism and Puritanism in his Germanophilic mind:

That deep-seated and uncorrupted Puritanism, that conviction of the pervasiveness of sin, of the supreme importance of moral correctness, of the need of savage and inquisitorial laws, has been a dominating force in American life since the very beginning. There has never been any question before the nation, whether political or economic, religious or military, diplomatic or sociological, which did not resolve itself, soon or late, into a purely moral question. . . . The frank theocracy of the New England colonies had scarcely succumbed to the

libertarianism of a godless Crown before there came the Great Awakening of 1734, with its orgies of homiletics and its restoration of talmudism to the first place among polite sciences. . . .

Thereafter, down to the outbreak of the Civil War, the country was rocked again and again by furious attacks upon the devil. On the one hand, this great campaign took a purely theological form, with a hundred new and fantastic creeds as its fruits; on the other hand, it crystallized into the hysterical temperance movement of the 30's and 40's, which penetrated to the very floor of Congress and put "dry" laws upon the statute-books of ten States; and on the third hand, as it were, it established a prudery in speech and thought from which we are yet but half delivered.

Say what you will about the accuracy of Mencken's depiction of Puritanism, his diagnosis of American moralism was even prophetic when he described the activism of the Progressive era in terms that make sense of the United States post-Trump, post-George Floyd, post-Lia Thomas:

The new Puritanism is not ascetic, but militant. Its aim is not to lift up saints but to knock down sinners. Its supreme manifestation is the vice crusade, an armed pursuit of helpless outcasts by the whole military and naval forces of the Republic. Its supreme hero is Comstock Himself, with his pious boast that the sinners he jailed during his astounding career, if gathered into one penitential party, would have filled a train of sixty-one coaches, allowing sixty to the coach.

Machen and Covid

Take his remarks on jaywalking legislation and you have a pretty good argument against the

government's pandemic policies:

These anti-pedestrian laws are intended either for the protection of the pedestrian, or for the convenience of the motorist. In either case . . . they are wrong.

If they are intended to protect the pedestrian from himself, they are paternalistic. I am opposed to paternalism. Among other far more serious objections to it is the objection that it defeats its own purpose. The children of some over-cautious parents never learn to take care of themselves, and so are far more apt to get hurt than children who lead a normal life. So I do not believe that in the long run it will be in the interests of safety if people get used to doing nothing except what a policeman or a traffic light tells them to do, and thus never learn to exercise reasonable care.

I am sorry when I see people taking foolish chances on the street. I believe in urging them not to do it. If they do it in outrageous and unreasonable fashion I should not be particularly averse to fining them for obstructing traffic. I rather think that might even be done under existing laws.

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Second Hand Smoke

When cigarettes went, the rest of tobacco products were sure to fall. This is an excerpt from a review of Sarah Milov, The Cigarette: A Political History (Harvard, 2019).

[Jimmy Carter's] administration

marked a transition in partisan identity. Although a farmer, Carter belonged to a crop of "new Democrats," such as Ted Kennedy and Gary Hart, who represented the suburbs more than the farms.

At the same time, the New Deal program was under stress from within. Active growers managing multifarm operations resented allotment holders who lived off rental income, while the manufacturers began to undercut the federal program's price supports by increasing their imports of cheaper leaf, classifying it as scrap to evade regulatory limits. Dropping demand meant smaller quotas. The image of the tobacco farmer now puzzled many Americans—the tiny farms looked "either medieval or Rockwellian," depending on one's viewpoint (254). In 1982, as public image and partisan identity shifted, the federal tobacco program transferred its costs from taxpayers to growers. Leaf surplus still entered New Deal-era stabilization warehouses, but the cost to store it grew. Manufacturers stepped in, offering to buy it at a steep discount. The 1980s version of agricultural crisis saw many tobacco farmers leave the field. Thirty-one states sued the industry, but the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between the states and the industry gave nothing to the farmers, though a later settlement did buy them out of production. As the century closed, tobacco farms consolidated, and warehouses shuttered. A new surgeon general's report supported the concept of passive smoking, and in 1986 federal buildings prohibited smoking. In 1990, smoking was banned on all domestic flights.

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