Canceling out the ‘cancel culture’ canard

Shammai Engelmayer

The “in” phrase these days (or should that be the “out” phrase?) is “cancel culture.” From President Trump on down (up?) the conservative line, there are almost hourly rants—and tweets and retweets—denouncing the “radical 'cancel culture’ left,” as Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) terms it. Most egregious to this crowd at the moment is “the statue cancellation tour,” as Fox News host Greg Gutfeld dubbed it in late June. The “tour” not only seeks to remove statues and other Confederate memorials, but also advocates renaming U.S. military installations and other facilities currently named for rebel war heroes.

As for the divider-in-chief, “President Trump stands against,” among other things, “’cancel culture,’ which seeks to erase our history,” according to White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany. Trump opposes removing any memorials to Confederate war heroes.

I have a suggestion for Trump and the rest of the anti-cancel culture crowd. Rather than just mouth off at what these protesters want, how about sticking it in their faces by erecting a statue to Benedict Arnold? If that is cost-prohibitive for the fiscal conservatives, just renaming that part of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House Benedict Arnold Boulevard will do. After all, why should anyone who sought to separate from the United States, and fought the bloodiest war in U.S. history to achieve that goal, be considered anything but a “Benedict Arnold,” otherwise a synonym for traitor but presumably a badge of honor in some quarters. (Arnold, a brigadier general in the Continental Army, had plotted to turn over West Point to the British in 1780, for which he received a 20,000-pound bribe.)

The number of Civil War dead had been estimated for over a century at 620,000, with the Union side suffering the most casualties. A few years ago, a new estimate was proposed—a minimum of 750,000 dead, and it could be as high as 850,000. Compare that to the nearly 712,000 American dead in two World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam war combined. That is how devastating a war Confederate forces inflicted on this country when they opened fire on Fort Sumter in April 1861. If that is not treason, what Benedict Arnold did cannot have been treason, either; no one lost a life because he sold out his countrymen. Until he turned from blue coat to red coat, he was considered an American hero. Where is his statue?

Why the South went to war also must be factored into the debate. It was to protect the institution of slavery. The election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency was the final straw for the South. Lincoln was opposed to slavery in general—“this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free,” he said during one of his famous debates with Stephen A. Douglas when the two were contending for a U.S. Senate seat from Illinois in 1856—and had vowed to keep slavery from spreading into the western territories, something the South could not abide.

The South also could not tolerate Lincoln’s argument that slavery violated the very principles upon which this nation was founded. The founding fathers “found the institution of slavery existing here,” he said. “They did not make it so, but they left it so because they knew of no way to get rid of it at that time.” To deny that, he said, was a “falsehood.”

“More than that,” Lincoln continued, “when the fathers of the government cut off the source of slavery by the abolition of the slave trade, and adopted a system of restricting it from the new Territories where it had not existed,” they “placed [slavery] where they understood, and all sensible men understood, it was in the course of ultimate extinction….”

Two days later, in their seventh and final debate, Lincoln took issue with the contention that blacks were not covered by the phrase in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” a favorite argument then taking hold in the South. It was an evil principle, because it had “a tendency to dehumanize the negro, to take away from him the right of ever striving to be a man.” Such a notion, he said, was “one of the thousand things constantly done in these days to prepare the public mind to make property—and nothing but property—of the negro in all the States of the Union.”

The fact is, no one in the so-called “cancel culture” wants to erase any part of America’s history. It simply is a matter of not publicly honoring people who sought to rip this nation apart and who thought that some people were less human than others—an argument made in the last century about us, as well, with catastrophic results for us.

One proposed justification for allowing these memorials is that the Confederate generals who led their troops into battle cannot be considered traitors because President Andrew Johnson, in late 1868, pardoned all who fought for the Confederacy, and because four years later President Ulysses S. Grant conferred amnesty on most Confederate soldiers, thereby allowing them to run for federal office.

Another casuistic argument is that the Constitution as it existed in 1860 did not define what “citizen” means, but rather seemed to convey two meanings—citizen of a state and citizen of the United States—with state citizenship taking precedence in the eyes of some. A soldier called to war by his state, therefore, cannot be called a traitor.

Neither pardon nor amnesty can bring back the hundreds of thousands of Civil War dead. Neither pardon nor amnesty can erase the indignities and cruelties of slavery. America needed to heal, and both Johnson and Grant, with Lincoln’s “with malice towards none” speech in mind, acted to bring that about, but that does not mitigate the crimes these “Southern heroes” perpetrated on this nation. Neither pardon nor amnesty can wash their hands clean of the blood they caused to be spilled and the dehumanizing horrors they sought to perpetuate.

Consider this: During the early days of the Israelites’ 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, a cousin of Moses and Aaron, Korach by name, led a revolt against their leadership in tandem with two Reubenites, Datan and Aviram. Korach had popular support, and he also made a strong case against them, on the surface.

As Numbers 16 reports it, Korach challenged his two cousins. “You take too much upon you,” he said, “seeing that all the congregation are holy, every one of them….Why, then, do you lift up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?”

Korach’s bit of sophistry rang true to many of the Israelites. After all, as we read in Exodus 19:6, they were told that they were “a kingdom of priests and holy nation.” They were also told that to “be holy” was the ultimate directive (see Leviticus 19:2). All Korach did was throw back at Moses words he himself had uttered in God’s Name.

Korach’s argument resonated with many people. God thought He had settled the matter when Korach’s Levite followers and the Reubenite-led group were killed, the latter in a sudden earthquake and the Levites by exploding firepans. Yet, “next day,” we are told in Numbers 17:6, “the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You two have brought death upon the Lord’s people!’”

This time, God responded with a plague. Over 15,000 Israelites died because of Korach and the evil he unleashed.

Now imagine how we would react if someone decided to put up a statue to Korach, Datan and Aviram in Van Saun Park in Bergen County, or Bear Mountain Park, which spans Orange and Rockland counties. These three rebel leaders brought about a horrific calamity, resulting in so many deaths. Is denying them monuments erasing our history? Are they worth honoring because Korach’s casuistry won the rebels popular support?

Nothing will ever erase the history of the Civil War. Nothing will ever erase the cruelties of slavery. Honoring those who perpetrated those crimes, however, is erasing history because it negates those crimes.

One must wonder whether the people who rant and rave against “cancel culture” even believe these were crimes. Does Donald Trump believe it? Does he believe that leading the nation into a bloody civil war and dehumanizing people because of the color of their skin were crimes?

These questions demand an answer, not from Trump and his allies, but from we the people—and we will have to give it on November 3.