

The Mob Comes Home

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 06 August 2019 12:06 - Last Updated Wednesday, 07 August 2019 07:25



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When I'm stumped for a column topic, my husband typically quips, "write about the outrage." It's a little joke we've been batting back and forth for years now.

But it's not that funny. Not really. Not anymore.

Since I've long been interested in exploring "sensitive" social, cultural, and political trends, I tend to keep this column trained on the national scene... or my own personal folly and foibles. What I *don't* do here often – to avoid hurting feelings or invading privacy – is examine those trends as they apply to our immediate community.

Having said that – and still keeping things vague – I'm sad to report that "the outrage" is alive and well and wreaking havoc in our own little town. If you haven't encountered it, you're probably not on social media – bless you for that – where Beaufortonians have been ganging up on other Beaufortonians and mob-shaming them with a righteous indignation that borders on glee. It's serious torch and pitchfork stuff, y'all. By now, we're used to seeing it happen on the national stage – which is unsettling enough – but it's shocking when the outrage comes home, up close and personal, to people you know. It's dizzying and disorienting to see dozens (hundreds?) of locals publicly piling-on and defaming another local *by name* – and calling on friends to boycott a local business – based on nothing more than politics.

I've witnessed a few such episodes on Facebook lately, which got me thinking about the long-standing American tradition that we don't discriminate against people based on their "race, creed, color, or national origin." I think all Americans of good will agree that this concept is

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foundational, and we strive to uphold it, however imperfectly. Most of it, anyway.

But I find myself wondering, lately, about the “creed” part of that phrase.

Does “creed” simply mean “religion”? I’m not sure anymore. I found several non-discrimination policy statements online – from various companies and other organizations – that include both “creed” and “religion” in their list, as if they were two different things. If you Google the word, you’ll find that a “creed” is a “formal statement of religious faith,” but also “a system of belief, principles, or opinions.” It’s that second definition that seems apropos these days. In a country where religious affiliation is on the steep decline, but the human craving for meaning is as strong as ever, it seems to me that “creed” is increasingly coming to mean “politics.”

And discriminating against people for their politics – their creed – is an increasingly common practice among otherwise “good” Americans, not just on a national level, but right here at home. That discrimination, once merely an opinion or private aversion, is now taking the form of active public destruction. People are openly working to ruin the reputations and livelihoods of their neighbors, and they’re feeling righteous about it.

There’s an old saying that “the personal is political.” I’m sure there’s plenty of truth to that, but the political has never felt quite so personal. And it chills me to the bone.

I’ve tried discussing this phenomenon with folks who participate regularly in these Internet pile-ups. They’re 100% certain that theirs is a noble cause. There’s no shame in shaming, they tell me. The people they’re hurting deserve it.

“Things are different now,” they say. “Because of Trump.”

But is that really the case? Does Donald Trump’s behavior – however bad it may be – really absolve us of our responsibility to uphold our own? And what about the fact that, whether you like it or not, Trump is still the president . . . and many of your neighbors *do* like it, for reasons that aren’t the nefarious ones you imagine?

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I respect the concept of voting with your dollars. It seems very American to me, in fact. If somebody in your community makes a political statement you don't like, and your disapproval runs deep, then by all means boycott his business. But to go on social media, drum up a large mob of fellow believers, and assault his character with taunts and jibes and personal insults? You might destroy his reputation, and you might even destroy his livelihood, but you won't change his politics. In fact, you'll probably just reinforce his negative ideas about *your* politics and cause him to double down.

In 2013, Cole Stryker wrote about social media shaming for *The Nation*, calling it, "self-righteousness masquerading as social justice."

"In many cases the targets deserve to be exposed and more," he says, "but public shaming does not drive social progress. It might make us feel better, but let's not delude ourselves into thinking we've made a positive difference."

More recently – this past May – Harmon Leon of *The Observer* wrote about the same subject: "Being part of a collective, such as an internet mob, somehow dissolves personal accountability. People are emboldened on social media; the format lends itself to little-to-no consequences for their actions. Add to that a lack of empathy for the target and the endorphins an emotional knee-jerk reaction harvests through 'likes' and you've got a recipe for an internet mob justice disaster."

And in June of this year, Dr. Guy Aitchison, a researcher at University College in Dublin, told *The Telegraph* that mob-shaming people on social media is a "relatively low cost way to feel like you are doing something noble. But there are also darker motivations at work: the psychic pleasure in seeing someone else brought low and humiliated."

In other words, before you join an Internet mob, think about your objective. And maybe more important, think about your humanity.

These are dark times in our country. Social protest is important and necessary, and many folks are doing it effectively. The League of Women Voters and Indivisible Beaufort

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recently sponsored a peaceful candlelight vigil on Lady's Island to protest inhumane conditions faced by migrants at the border. Five supporters of President Trump showed up to counter-protest – and show their support for immigration reform – and when they started singing *God Bless America*, members of the hundreds-strong vigil joined in. This is how it's done. And it can only happen face to face.

Americans are more divided than at any time I can remember, and I'm pretty old. When things fall apart on a macro level, all we have left is the micro. The community. As Americans continue to turn on other Americans, can we find a way to resist turning on our own neighbors? Can we look closely enough to see the people behind the politics?

A small town is no place for a mob.