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Richard Nixon and the 1959 “Kitchen Debate”

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We usually remember Richard Nixon as the flawed 37th president, responsible for the notorious Watergate scandal. As a result, we often overlook his political successes. Despite his moral opaqueness, Nixon proved to be a shrewd and effective politician, adept in foreign policy, and able to captivate the American people. Going toe to toe with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev on the merits of capitalism might not have been the hallmark of his political life, but it helped gain him notoriety. Nixon’s “Kitchen Debate” with Khrushchev on July 24, 1959 introduced the nation to his talent in foreign affairs and served as a stepping stone in his career.

In 1959, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to establish exhibits in each other’s countries as a means of cultural exchange and understanding. The Soviet exhibit in New York would showcase the accomplishments of communism, while the American exhibit in Moscow showcased the wonders of capitalism. Part of the American exhibit featured a model suburban home with a picture-perfect kitchen. That kitchen would become the arena and namesake of Nixon’s debate with Khrushchev.

Vice President Nixon took Premier Khrushchev on a tour of the exhibit, pointing out all the marvelous appliances and consumer goods American companies had to offer. The two men, sincerely holding their political beliefs, clashed fiercely yet good-heartedly. Khrushchev remarked that the United States had 150 years to develop what the exhibit displayed while the Soviet Union had only been around for 42 years. He added that in seven years, the USSR would reach the level of innovation in the United States and then surpass it. He jokingly jabbed that “We’ll wave at you” as we pass by. Nixon responded calmly and then quipped: “as far as Mr. Khrushchev’s comments just now, they are in the tradition we have come to expect from him of speaking extemporaneously and frankly whenever he has an opportunity.”

Khrushchev later protested that the debate was not on an equal playing field since American cameras filmed it. He

worried that his argument would not be translated, and that Americans would hear only what Nixon had to say. In turn, Nixon requested that the Soviet Union air the debate together with the United States to ensure that the Soviet people would hear him. Khrushchev agreed, and the two men shook on the deal. But the American media broadcasted the event immediately while the Soviet government waited two days and gave only a partial translation of Nixon’s comments.

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The Kitchen Debate set the tone for Nixon’s future foreign policy triumphs. While standing his ground against the bombastic Soviet leader, in the debate he had focused on bettering relations and exchanging ideas between the two countries, for the benefit of all people. Khrushchev himself conceded that Nixon was “tough minded” and “strong willed.” So began Nixon’s later policy of hard-headed détente. As president, he would make substantial advances in foreign relations. Through policies like the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), Nixon relaxed the Cold War and reduced the chances of a disastrous nuclear conflict. Furthermore, he opened relations with the People’s Republic of China and, with the Paris Peace Accords, ended American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Nixon’s performance in the Kitchen Debate heightened his profile among the American public, made the vice presidency seem like a more important role, and set the stage for his ultimate ascension to the Oval Office. As the journalist Jules Witcover put it, the debate with Khrushchev gave Nixon “near celebrity status.” Previously, he was less popular and an overall liability to the well-liked President Eisenhower and his administration. With his visit to Moscow, Nixon was the first vice president to become a familiar face and strong hand in diplomatic affairs. His new-found public standing helped him become the Republican nominee in the 1960 presidential election. Even in the aftermath of his loss to John F. Kennedy, Nixon maintained his public prestige and came out victorious in the 1968 election.

Immoral Republicans: A Response

ANDREW JUCHNO
MANAGING EDITOR

Last week, *The Monitor* published “The Inherent Immorality of the Republican Party.” I urge my readers—Democratic, Republican, and otherwise—to look over that article, if they have not already. In it, Evan Weinstein argues that Republicans or at least conservatives “have always been morally deficient.” Unable to comprehend how Republicans can hold views that he feels are morally debased while being seemingly kind and caring, Mr. Weinstein is left puzzled.

Mr. Weinstein and I, and likely many others, agree that President Trump is amoral. The president’s infamously repugnant attitude toward women alone is enough to corrode his moral credibility. It is, however, an unsubstantiated overgeneralization to claim that “Republicans tend to be less friendly and empathetic to those with racial or economic or gender differences.” Such a logical leap seems based more on feeling than serious consideration of Republican or conservative principles.

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Cherry-picking past policies to find evidence that the Republican Party is immoral presents more problems for Democrats than it solves. It is all too easy for Republicans to respond in kind with their own hand-selected examples, which Mr. Weinstein aptly recognizes.

own hand-selected examples, which Mr. Weinstein aptly recognizes. The issue, then, is how to decide which party is more moral. We could, as Mr. Weinstein does, trade blows over the particular depravities enacted by the parties over the years. Such an approach leads to little more than childish finger-pointing and avoids substantive debate.

Yes, many in the Republican Party stood

on the wrong side of the civil rights movement. Does this mean that Republicans now hold views that are similarly extreme? While Mr. Weinstein cites the drone strikes President Obama ordered as one of the Democrats' moral lows, has he forgotten which administration interned Japanese-Americans in the Second World War? (Talk about empathy for racial difference.) In evaluating parties, are we left to weigh the relative immorality of every administration and then perform some sort of moral calculus? Such an approach does little to help us understand the parties to which we currently belong.

Most troubling about the article is that its premise evidences a failure of Hamilton's educational mission. By my understanding, institutions like Hamilton are meant to teach students different ways of knowing. Such an education should require of students a transcript that shows disciplinary diversity.

History remains one such department that too many students, blessed with the open curriculum and loose advising, now avoid.

In any serious history class at Hamilton, one of the very first skills a professor teaches is the ability to exercise the historical imagination. One must put aside preconceptions and prejudices to evaluate a particular society fairly. Given that conservatives, and certainly their views, seem as foreign to Mr. Weinstein as people from the far reaches of the past, I would suggest he try to understand them from a historical perspective. Doing so does not imply tacit approval of conservative thought, only a serious attempt to understand why some of his friends and family members are conservative. Upon such an examination, I hope he finds that conservatives are not immoral, but rather evaluate the world with a system of morals different than his own. As Mr. Weinstein remains unable to conceive of any "acceptable and consistent ideology" whose morals overlap with the conservatives',

I would suggest he read into Catholicism.

That we even have to treat the modern-day Republican Party and conservatives as a historical phenomenon indicates Hamilton's political leanings. Considering the political demographics of our student body, conservative students should not be shocked to find that we are such an ideological minority on campus. That said, however, conservative students are no less responsible for Hamilton's climate than are liberal students. I remain unconvinced that the Hamilton student body as a whole is so politically intolerant that it cannot weather debate between highly opposed views.

Incumbent upon us all is the responsibility to passionately express and logically defend our ideas. We should not fault others for misunderstanding conservatism if they have little exposure to its tenets. However, we should fault anyone who promotes hatred and uses malicious arguments. I will not allow myself to be ostracized from any community of which I am a part.

Kavanaugh's Originalism Is Not Just Conservatism In Disguise

MICHAEL LaPORTE
STAFF WRITER

Brett Kavanaugh's recent appointment to the Supreme Court makes him the fifth justice who generally believes in Constitutional Originalism. Like its chief theoretical rival, Living Constitutionalism, Originalism has many nuances. Justice Kavanaugh's understanding of it will by no means always result in the same rulings as Justice Thomas's. All Originalists, however, consider themselves bound by the meaning of the text.

What motivates judges to interpret the law in this way? To many, such an approach seems foreign. Why should present-day society be forced to live by antiquated and objectionable definitions of equality, liberty, and democracy? Might 21st-century Americans have a better understanding of what "We the people of the United States" means? Why should we in the present be ruled by the so-called dead hand of the past? Thus go standard criticisms from those who view the Constitution as a living, breathing document that adapts to the needs and goals of today's society.

Living Constitutionalism has been in fashion since the rise of modern liberalism. This legal philosophy offers an easy solution to the problem of rapidly changing realities related to race, gun violence, gender, and sexuality. Confronted with originalist justices who rule for greater restrictions on women's access to abortion, expanded gun liberties, and a strictly heterosexual conception of marriage, it is easy for some to simply write off Originalism as not a legally respectable

way for conservatives to get their desired results on partisan or ideological issues such as abortion, gun control, and same-sex marriage.

The fact is, however, that there are strong theoretical and methodological reasons, independent of political ideology, in support of Originalism. It has its share of problems, to be sure, but it is undoubtedly a legitimate and formidable contender in debates over constitutional interpretation.

The central concern motivating originalists is that if a judge does not interpret a law or constitutional cause to mean what it originally

Living Constitutionalist judges may mean well, and may even be doing society a favor by changing the Constitution to better fit the needs and goals of present-day society. But as Scalia famously declared: "if there is no fixed absolute, if the Constitution evolves to mean what it ought to mean today, what makes you think the majority is going to leave it to judges to decide what the Constitution ought to mean?"

meant, then the judge has illegitimately made up a new law. There are really two basic insights here: it is not the job of the judge to make law, only to clarify its meaning; and the meaning of a law (including the Constitution, which is also law) is fixed at the time of its enactment.

Our system was set up with three branches of government, each with a distinct task. It is the job of the legislative branch to make the law, the job of the judiciary to clarify the meaning of laws

(and to decide whether they're constitutional) when disputes about them arise, and the job of the executive to enforce laws. In our democracy, the people through their elected representatives get to make the laws; unelected judges do not. Judges are not tasked with updating the Constitution, but are merely supposed to apply it. Congress updates the Constitution by proposing and ratifying amendments, which it has done seventeen times following the adoption (shortly after the Constitution took effect) of the Bill of Rights.

According to Originalism, the law, or clause in the Constitution, must mean the same thing it did when it was enacted. This assumption guarantees the law's continued existence and binding force, even as society changes. And this, as Justice Scalia repeatedly emphasized, is exactly what written law is supposed to do. When the founders outlawed cruel and unusual punishments in the Bill of Rights, Scalia said, they did not mean "whatever your current society thinks 'cruel' and 'unusual' mean." Such a law, in his view, would not have any valid binding force at all.

If the courts can just assign a new meaning to something in the Constitution, then there's really no point in a constitution at all; it just becomes whatever nine, or five out of nine, justices say it is. Living Constitutionalist judges may mean well, and may even be doing society a favor by changing the Constitution to better fit the needs and goals of present-day society. But as Scalia famously declared: "if there is no fixed absolute, if the Constitution evolves to mean what it ought to mean today, what makes you think the majority is going to leave it to judges to decide what the Constitution ought to mean? ... If there are no fixed legal standards, if the justices on the Supreme Court are supposed to tell us what are the evolving standards of decency that reflect a maturing society, a majority of the people and its political leadership will look for judges who agree with the majority as to what the Constitution means. And so we will have the absolutely crazy system in which we conduct a mini-plebiscite on the meaning of the Constitution every time we select a person to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court."

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