

Horton's

Michigan Notebook

Political & Social Commentary

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Words of Inspiration

By Steve Horton

In 1968, some 50 years ago, I saw *The Fixer*. The movie starred Alan Bates as Yakov Bok, a Jew in Czarist Russia who was falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Gentile child.

The accusation, known as blood libel, was the belief that Jewish people used the blood of Christians in religious rituals, especially in the preparation of Passover Bread. This belief was “perpetrated throughout the Middle Ages in Europe and continued into the early 20th century.”

The movie as based on a novel by the American author Bernard Malamud, a Jew, who had based his story on the incidents of a trial that took place in Russia in 1913 where blood libel was presented as a possible motivation for a Jewish man charged with murdering a Ukrainian boy.

The protagonist was a handyman who repaired things, hence the title of both the book and movie.

In a pivotal scene, the Russian official visits the Bates' character in his jail cell. Asked by the imprisoned man ‘why’ he is being falsely accused of this crime, the official says (and I’m recalling this from



Wes Vivian attempted to return to the U.S. Congress in 1968. Thus far, it has been the only campaign I worked on as a volunteer.

memory), “You can unite people with love or with fear. Fear is the easier.”

That observation has remained with me and is about the only detail I remember from the film. It resounded then, and still does.

Presumably, if you attend a church or share a religious belief with others, love is the emotion that inspires. “Love God” and “Love thy neighbor” are the commands I’ve often heard.

Of course, some people’s definition of neighbor is more limited than others. As for

fear, well that is still the stock-in-trade when it comes to persuading and motivating people.

In Czarist Russia, pogroms (which means ‘devastation’ or ‘to wreak havoc’) occurred regularly during the late 1800s and into the early 1900s. These involved attacks by mobs against Jews and were often approved or condoned by those in authority. Incidents such as the alleged ritual murder of a Gentile boy by a Jewish man were used as a justification for the violence.

Having a convenient scapegoat to focus anger and frustration or accusing a minority of being a threat are tools often used by those in power, or who are seeking power, to unite others to their banner.

DEMAGOGUERY AND FEAR-MONGERING seem to be alive and well as we experience another campaign season. Those are admittedly strong words for what’s more benignly known as ‘negative political advertising’ or ‘attack ads.’

You can’t turn on a TV, check out the internet, or pick up your mail without being told how horrible a candidate is—at least according to his or her opponent or some special-interest group opposing that person’s election. To see or hear or read this stuff, you’d think they’d let the murderers off death row or the insane asylums had been emptied and now these people are running for office, rather than men and women of good character and proven accomplishment who are offering certain proposals and policies.

The purpose of negative advertising is very simple—to sow seeds of doubt, concern, and even fear at the prospect of that person being elected. Driving down this candidate’s likability is the goal, particularly if they’re ahead in the polls or have a good chance of winning the election.

I think most voters know what’s going on. But, as experts tell us (those who interview and poll voters), we have negative advertising

because it works. Despite the professed distaste for this practice and despite how it turns folks off from the political process, apparently enough people are persuaded.

Taking the high road may be a nobler route, but the hard reality is that if an opponent slings mud or an outside group does it for them, then the candidate under attack is counseled to respond in kind. And so that’s what we get.

Disparaging an opponent has always been part of political campaigns, dating back to John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in 1800—the first one after George Washington left the presidency. But the sophistication of technology, coupled with the availability of huge sums of money, seem to have only enhanced and expanded the practice.

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FIFTY YEARS AGO I WAS 16 GOING ON 17. My interest in current events, including politics and governmental policies (especially those involving the Vietnam War) was growing.

I wanted to become more engaged beyond discussions in our high school classes or with family and friends. The presidential candidacy of Robert Kennedy caused personal excitement, but I was still a bystander when he was assassinated in early June of that year—a few days before my junior year of high school came to an end.

That summer I managed to connect with the campaign of Wes Vivian who had been a supporter of Kennedy and was seeking to return to Congress.

A resident of Ann Arbor, Wes had been elected to the House in 1964 as part of Lyndon Johnson’s landslide. However, he lost re-election two years later to the Republican challenger, Marv Esch. Now the two of them were once again facing off, each of them seeking to represent the 2nd District that included Washtenaw and Livingston Counties.

I was soon calling people on the phone at an office in Brighton, asking them if they were registered to vote with the ulterior motive of finding out if they leaned towards our candidate. Most of those I called didn't lean that way.

I also enlisted a couple of friends, along with my sister and little brother, to pass out literature at homes in Green Oak Township—the only area of the county that we thought might harbor a sizable number of sympathetic voters. In addition, I attended a few meet-the-candidate parties where I met other political enthusiasts.

On Election Night, I drove to a union hall with two of my friends and fellow campaigners to attend Vivian's election-watch party. I had visions of a packed room of cheering supporters. Instead the place was a nearly empty with those in attendance crowded around a TV set to follow the returns from the presidential election that involved Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and George Wallace. Nixon and Humphrey were locked in a close race, which was the only excitement that evening.

Vivian stopped by, shook hands, greeted us, and left. Soon we departed as well. The predictions that he would lose proved all too true.

I remained involved in politics for couple of years, but became less and less engaged after heading off to Michigan State. Writing rather than politicking took precedence. Other interests evolved as well.

Thus far, the 1968 campaign has been the only one that I worked at as a volunteer. For the past 40-plus years my participation in the electoral process has been as a journalist, mainly at the local level, writing stories on who was running, what they stood for, and the outcome of the election. In that role I'm mainly a spectator.

After Bobby Kennedy's death, I bought an album of his most famous speeches. Listening

to them over the next year or two, his words, the sentiments they expressed, were both motivating and instructive. I was soon quoting parts of them for classroom speeches and later for articles I wrote.

The best one was his Day of Affirmation Speech to students in South Africa—delivered at a time when that nation was in the grips of apartheid. In the midst of the current campaign, with all of the negative advertising and harsh rhetoric, with the fear-mongering and demagoguery, I listened again to the speech—only now on YouTube.

Here are a few excerpts.

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“This is a Day of Affirmation, a celebration of liberty. We stand here in the name of freedom. At the heart of that Western freedom and democracy is the belief that the individual man, the child of God, is the touchstone of value, and all society, groups, the state, exist for his benefit. Therefore the enlargement of liberty for individual human beings must be the supreme goal and the abiding practice of any Western society.

“The first element of this individual liberty is the freedom of speech: the right to express and communicate ideas, to set oneself apart from the dumb beasts of field and forest; to recall governments to their duties and obligations; above all, the right to affirm one's membership and allegiance to the body politic—to society—to the men with whom we share our land, our heritage, and our children's future.

“Hand in hand with freedom of speech goes the power to be heard, to share in the decisions of government which shape men's lives.

“Everything that makes man's life worthwhile--family, work, education, a place to rear one's children and a place to rest one's head---all this depends on decisions of government; all can be swept away by a government which does not heed the demands

of its people. Therefore, the essential humanity of men can be protected and preserved only where government must answer-- not just to the wealthy, not just to those of a particular religion, or a particular race, but to all its people.

“And even government by the consent of the governed, as in our own Constitution, must be limited in its power to act against its people; so that there may be no interference with the right to worship, or with the security of the home; no arbitrary imposition of pains or penalties by officials high or low; no restrictions on the freedom of men to seek education or work or opportunity of any kind, so that each man may become all he is capable of becoming.

“These are the sacred rights of Western society. These were the essential differences between us and Nazi Germany, as they were between Athens and Persia.”

Later in his speech was this observation.

“In a few hours, the plane that brought me to this country crossed over oceans and countries which have been a crucible of human history. In minutes we traced the migration of men over thousands of years; seconds, the briefest glimpse, and we passed battlefields on which millions of men once struggled and died. We could see no national boundaries, no vast gulfs or high walls dividing people from people; only nature and the works of man--homes and factories and farms--everywhere reflecting man’s common effort to enrich his life.

“Everywhere new technology and communications bring men and nations closer together, the concerns of one inevitably becoming the concerns of all. And our new closeness is stripping away the false masks, the illusion of difference which is at the root of injustice and hate and war.

“Only earthbound man still clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe

ended at river shore, his common humanity enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town and views and the color of his skin. It is your job, the task of the young people of this world, to strip the last remnants of that ancient, cruel belief from the civilization of man.

“Each nation has different obstacles and different goals, shaped by the vagaries of history and of experience. Yet as I talk to young people around the world I am impressed not by the diversity but by the closeness of their goals, their desires and their concerns and their hope for the future. There is discrimination in New York, the racial inequality of apartheid in South Africa, and serfdom in the mountains of Peru. People starve in the streets of India, a former Prime Minister is summarily executed in the Congo, intellectuals go to jail in Russia, and thousands are slaughtered in Indonesia; wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere in the world.

“These are differing evils; but they are the common works of man. They reflect the imperfections of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, the defectiveness of our sensibility toward the sufferings of our fellows; they mark the limit of our ability to use knowledge for the well-being of our fellow human beings throughout the world. And therefore they call upon common qualities of conscience and indignation, a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary sufferings of our fellow human beings at home and around the world.”

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THAT RUSSIAN OFFICIAL IN *THE FIXER* WAS RIGHT. It’s always easier to appeal to our fears, to stir up our anger and animosity, to pit neighbor against neighbor than it is to rally us around the notion of ‘love thy neighbor.’

But despite being faced with that reality, I believe that that vision outlined by Kennedy is still the better choice; the better path forward. Then as now, they remain words of inspiration.

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