

Make today great again

Instead of glorifying the past, what if we treated the present as precious?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue



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I never cease to be amazed by calls for America to return to a previous era of greatness. Although historians have yet to locate such an idyllic chapter in our nation's history, their conclusions haven't stopped large segments of the population from glorifying the past. Selective memory holds attractive appeal. Warm sentimentality, however oblivious to real experience, feels good. A campaign slogan like "Make America Great *Again*" (emphasis mine) can prove exceedingly effective.

For a sense of the backward-looking and trapped-in-nostalgia behaviors of our political parties, check out Anthony Robinson's review of Yuval Levin's *The Fractured Republic* ("[Getting past the past](#)"). Or, for a different take on the good ol' days, try reading your newspaper's letters to the editor. Here's one I came across recently:

The battle between good and evil is raging out of control in America. We are doomed so long as our country insists on trashing the Ten Commandments and failing to return to Jesus. We will never return to the greatness of our past until we return to God and put prayer back in our schools. It's time for America's sin-sick soul to wake up.

Notice the author's reliance on the word *return*. One wonders what past era he might have in mind. Was it America's legacy of enslaving African peoples, only to lynch numbers of them later? Was it the 18th century and its primitive medicine, or the 19th century and its marginal sanitation? Perhaps his cherished past exists somewhere in the past 100 years, when women still lacked the right to vote, laborers had frighteningly few rights, the needs of the disabled went largely ignored, Agent Orange wreaked havoc, and the waterboarding of terror suspects became acceptable to some top brass.

Nostalgia that ignores blemishes of the past makes for shabby history. The ancient Israelites, who longed for the fleshpots of Egypt despite being freshly liberated from the pharaoh, remind us that glorifying the past is not an exclusively modern or American phenomenon. Anyone from any epoch is capable of shelving complexity for the sake of remembering the good and forgetting the bad.

In a commencement address at Vassar College, columnist Art Buchwald spoke about the shortcomings of nostalgia: "Everyone seems to think yesterday was better than today . . . I would advise you not to wait ten years from now before admitting today was great. If you're hung up on nostalgia, pretend today is yesterday and go out and have one hell of a good time."

We might translate Buchwald's "go out and have one hell of a good time" to read more spiritually: "Live the life you have been given—now." That isn't to imply that we answer only to ourselves. To enjoy the miracle of now is to appreciate the confidence God has in us for crafting a future. I say treat every hour of each day as precious and unrepeatable. Get blisters. Read something foreign to your brain. Cherish hope. Love someone difficult. However you and I plot our moves, we'd be wise to fight the urge to romanticize the past, lest we obscure the opportunities and demands of the present.

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