

When I was a child, I remember celebrating – no, make that observing – George Washington’s Birthday. Mostly because we got a day off from school. But beyond that, I don’t remember the adults making a big deal of it.

It was always on Washington’s actual birthdate – February 22nd, and in the early 20th century it was one of the bigger US holidays – right behind Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the 4th of July.

Abraham Lincoln’s birthday – February 12th – was also celebrated in many places in the North and West, so I vaguely remember getting few school days off for that, depending on where we were living.

I must confess that I don’t remember Washington’s Birthday becoming Presidents’ Day. I was in high school when it changed, and I was more interested in girls and music at the time.

What happened was the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1971. This law shifted the celebration of several federal holidays from specific dates to a series of predetermined Mondays.

The change was seen as a way to create more three-day weekends for the nation’s workers. Many thought that shifting holidays from their original dates would devalue their meaning. But the bill had widespread support from both big business and labor unions and was seen as yet another way to boost retail sales. So it passed.

And now we have Presidents’ Day, which is still officially Washington’s Birthday, by the way, even though it’s meant to celebrate all U.S. presidents, living or dead.

Color me cynical, but the only actual celebration I can find online is the George Washington Birthday parade in Alexandria, Virginia.

You can however, get 1.9% financing for 60 months on a new Acura, 30% off home items at Target, and get a great deal on a new laptop from Dell, Lenovo, or HP.

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Dead presidents.

Dead presidents is – or at least was – rap slang for cash money. Since our bills mostly have pictures of dead presidents on them, it wasn't too much of a leap.

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Dead Presidents is also the title of a 1995 crime thriller, co-written by Michael Henry Brown and Albert and Allen Hughes, who also produced and directed the film. The story follows an African-American man, Anthony Curtis, as he returns to his Bronx home after a brutal tour of duty in Vietnam. But he and his friends can't find steady work and provide for their families in a country and an economy that favors neither veterans or people of color. In desperation, Anthony teams up with a four friends to rob an armored car full of – you guessed it – dead presidents.

Of course, the robbery goes terribly wrong. Two of the robbers die, as do two security guards and a police officer. Although the three surviving robbers make off with some of the money, their freedom is short lived, and they end up either dead or imprisoned.

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The underlying theme of the film is that of structural racism and structural economic inequality, which for people of color, are pretty much the same thing. The legacy of dead presidents. Neither the film nor the legacy have a happy ending.

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We mythologize and remember Washington as the “Father of our Country”, that Lincoln freed the slaves, that Jefferson wrote the Constitution –all important things - and that there were a couple of Roosevelts and a Kennedy in there somewhere. But unless you are a historian, they are mostly forgotten men, and their picture on a bill has more significance.

A problem with all these dead presidents we've elevated as national figures, is that while many of them have some noble characteristics, they've also done some pretty unsavory things, and they aren't regarded as heroes by many Americans.

There is plenty to find fault with. They were complicated and contradictory men. Washington owned slaves, although he freed them on his death. Jefferson and all the presidents up to and including Grant owned at least one slave. Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and most other presidents thought that Native Americans needed to be either totally eradicated or utterly assimilated.

Lest we overlook the obvious, they are also all white and male. Products of a patriarchal society in which they wielded a great deal of power.

For those who pay attention to history, this is common knowledge, and I'm not here to rehash the blood and genocide that this country was built on.

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The stories a nation tells itself are important. Without some common story, some shared understanding of meaning and purpose, some shared identity, it's impossible for a nation to hold together.

After World War II, the American story really began to fray at the edges, and is now on the verge of unravelling completely.

After the war, all the women who had worked in the factories and sacrificed on the home front balked at returning to their previous roles. Massive advertising campaigns sprang up to convince the nation that the future lay in traditional gender roles and the nuclear family.

After the war, internal propaganda campaigns promoted the idea that America and the allies had made the world safe for democracy, while ignoring the fact the democracy was not being practiced at home.

After the war, non-white veterans found their sacrifice was not equal to that of their white counterparts, while the myth of equality was promoted. The internment camps were conveniently ignored.

A new enemy was invoked, and the Cold War began, while the post-war economic boom floated all boats and spread American values and goods around the world.

With the exception of the Cold War, most of that lasted about a decade or so. The civil rights movement – put on hold during the war – started up again, and gained strength, as did the women’s rights movement. Students saw that their country wasn’t living up to its expressed values and began asking questions. Red, black, yellow, and brown voices began to speak out.

Vietnam put an end to the idea that we were making the world safe for democracy, something that had become apparent earlier to much of the rest of world.

And since then, our national story has been deeply contested. Is our future one of dead presidents – of money and old myths – or something else?

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Nationalism is largely seen as something that belongs to the political right. Something that moves to a jingoistic, patriotic drumbeat, a story of greatness that can do no wrong. It is muscular, expansionist, violent, and oppressive.

Those criticisms hold a lot of truth. But there are many kinds of nationalism. There is ethnic nationalism, where the nation is defined in terms of ethnicity. There is economic nationalism and religious nationalism. Racial nationalism is the ideology that advocates a racial definition of national identity. Anti-colonial nationalism came about during the decolonization of the post war periods.

Territorial nationalism describes a form of nationalism based on the belief that all inhabitants of a particular territory should share a common national identity – but that frequently conflicts with ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and other differences.

Any of these can combine into different forms of nationalism. The latest is the neo-nationalism sweeping the world – a nationalism marked by right-wing populism, anti-globalization, nativist sentiments, trade protectionism, opposition to immigration, opposition to Islam and Muslims – and a call to return to some idealized past greatness and cultural conformity.

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Nationalism has a bad reputation with liberals and the left because we associate it with the right. And truthfully, there are many form of nationalism that fit very well into right-wing politics and their ideas about the nature of people and society. It also has a bad reputation because much of our national mythology has turned out not to apply to women, people of color, those less economically fortunate, and a whole host of others.

Because of that bad reputation, the left has tended to completely reject the very idea of nationalism. When we do that, it leaves the right in control of the narrative. Which is something we cannot do if we are to salvage anything in the years to come.

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The ideals promoted by our national mythology still persist; ideals of equality and fraternity, opportunity and freedom. People still come here from all over the world, seeking the fulfillment of those ideals. People who already live here seek the fulfillment of those ideals, particularly those who have been denied them.

The question is: Is there a form of nationalism that the left can support?

I think so. It's called civic nationalism, sometimes known as liberal nationalism, although the two are not completely identical.

Civic nationalism is an inclusive form of nationalism based on traditional liberal ideals of freedom, tolerance, equality, and individual rights. Civic nationalism defines the nation as an association of people who identify themselves as belonging to that nation, who have equal and shared political rights, and allegiance to common political processes.

Civic nationhood is a political identity built around shared citizenship. Thus, a "civic nation" isn't defined by its language or culture or race, but by its political institutions and principles, which its citizens pledge to uphold. Membership in the civic nation is open to anyone who shares these values – whatever your other characteristics. It also means your religious, ethnic, cultural, class, or party identity is valued, but is secondary to your primary political identity as a citizen.

Because it is inclusive, civic nationalism is against bigotry, prejudice, and racism. It honors diversity. A foundational value is pluralism, which is the freedom to have a multi-faceted identity, to add as many hyphens to who you are as you like and still be an American.

Sound familiar?

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There are many who hold that liberalism and nationalism are mutually incompatible. The civic nation state is a rather recent invention, one that has yet to stand the test of time. Prior to the 19th century, people put their trust in cities and dynasties, feudal lords, religious groups, land, or ethnic identities.

But without some shared sense of community, of shared national identity, it is hard to imagine a nation holding together, especially as diverse a country as ours. But nationalism has become a fact of life, and the struggle since our beginning is what kind of nation will we have.

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The human impulse to tribalism is ancient, and runs deep. Much of it is the result of our evolutionary history in small tribal groups. Our response to nationalism is rarely rational, even on the liberal end of the spectrum.

But even though we don't wrap ourselves in the flag or see our history through rose-colored glasses or blindly follow leaders, we too have a claim to our nation and its ideals.

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Re-creating a sense of community and common purpose is not as simple as just saying so, or claiming the mandate of Heaven. The people weave story and ideal and experience into a national mythos. And not all of that is controllable by the powers that be, no matter what they may think. We'll visit that subject next month.

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I'll close today by returning to the subject of slang terms for cash. For a long time, slang for money had to do with references to their appearance, to food, or to trading customs.

Calling a dollar bill a buck came about because deerskins were once a medium of exchange. A sawbuck? Ten in roman numerals is an X, which looked like a sawhorse, ergo.. a ten dollar bill is a sawbuck. A twenty was a Jackson, a five was a Lincoln. A hundred was a Franklin.

Our bills are green, so we got frogs, frogskins, green, guac, cabbage, broccoli. Greenback was a Civil War term for Union currency.

Money meant food, so cheese, cheddar, clams, bacon, bread, biscuits, and bones. Dough.

There is a certain rough vitality to all these terms. A liveliness, a sense of growth and nourishment, of personality.

Until next time, I leave you to ponder what the term "dead presidents" tell us about the mythic state of the union.