



ARE YOU ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY?

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“The wrong side of history:” it’s one of President Barack Obama’s favorite expressions.

He’s not alone, of course. It’s a perennial favorite of liberal politicians and activists. Oppose gay marriage? You’re on the wrong side of history. Against pot legalization? You’re stuck in the past.

It’s used a lot in foreign policy, too. In his first inaugural address, for example, President Obama said, “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history...”

As Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt disintegrated in 2011 and the United States stood by and watched, Obama fell back on the comforting thought that “History will end up recording that at every juncture ... we were on the right side of history.” As Libyan dictator, Muammar Qaddafi’s chapter on this earth came to an end, President Obama justified American policy in Libya by saying, “I believe that Qaddafi is on the wrong side of history.” Speaking more broadly about the then still young “Arab Spring” he said, “I think that the region will be watching carefully to make sure we’re on the right side of history.” When Vladimir Putin started carving up Ukraine, the president insisted that America wouldn’t actually do anything about it, but fear not – because Putin is on the wrong side of history. The “long moral arc of the universe” – another of Obama’s favorite phrases – will “bend toward justice.” In the meantime: Tough luck, Ukrainians.

You may not have noticed, but the phrase has opposite meanings when used at home and abroad. Domestically, telling someone they are on “the wrong side of history” means “You’re going to lose eventually, so why don’t you give up now?” But in foreign policy, it means, “I’m powerless to stop you, but one day, long after I have any responsibility to do anything at all, someone else will say you were wrong.”

In other words, when used at home “the wrong side of history” is a sign of strength – our activism is vindicated; things are going our way! – But internationally the phrase is a sign of weakness – “you’re winning and I can’t, or won’t stop you!”

What unites both terms is arrogance – actually, arrogance and cowardice.

The notion that History is moving in an inevitable direction is ancient, but in modern times its main champion was Karl Marx. Marx argued that socialism was inevitable according to some scientific principle. Therefore any objection to its unstoppable triumph was not only morally wrong but anti-intellectual and even unscientific.

This is what the great historian of Communism, Robert Conquest, meant when he said that the phrase “the wrong side of history” has a “Marxist twang” to it. It was the atheist’s answer to the religious notion that “God is on our side,” and it led to millions dying as socialists desperately tried to steam roll the future with the Wheel of History.

The idea has non-Marxist proponents, too. There is what the renowned Cambridge historian, Herbert Butterfield, called the “Whig School of history” which holds that democracy – though not necessarily socialism – is inevitable.

This is a much nicer thought, to be sure. But being nicer doesn’t make it any more true (and, to be honest, many people have died in service to this idea as well).

At home and abroad, for socialists and democrats alike, the problem is the same: The future is a blank page and we don’t know what will be written on it. But one thing is certain: when people come to believe that they are not masters of their own fate – because history is not on their side – they will be less likely to take their fate into their own hands.

Pick your issue: It may well be true that same-sex marriage is here to stay, that Americans will never relinquish their gun rights or, heck, that soccer might actually become America’s pastime.

But the only way such victories are assured is if those opposing them preemptively surrender based upon some potted assertions that defeat is inevitable. That is what is so undemocratic about the idea that there is a right side to history – it amounts to saying “shut up” to anyone who wants to keep the argument going.

Freedom has no meaning if we give over to the idea that we are powerless against the cold impersonal forces that shape our destiny. In life, but particularly in a democracy, defeat only comes when the losing side accepts defeat.

For generations those on the right side of slavery and civil rights were told they were on the wrong side of history. They proved history wrong by refusing to surrender to it.

To paraphrase the English poet, T.S. Eliot, “There is no such thing as a truly lost cause because there is no such thing as a truly won cause.” So long as you are willing to fight for what you believe in, the cause endures.

Let history take care of itself.

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