



A statue of Roger Williams, 17th-century Puritan minister and champion of religious liberty, stands in Providence, Rhode Island. (Wikimedia Commons/Kenneth C. Zirkel)



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Democrats must acquire a more balanced sense of history, humility about their public policy goals, and a sense of humor about human life if they are serious about winning elections again. That is just as important as abandoning their alienating traits, such as [heresy-hunting](#) and [scientism](#), as we discussed recently.

History gives a culture its bearings. If you want to know why things are the way they are, you need to know how we got here. Sadly, a generation or more of college graduates, especially at elite colleges, were schooled in deconstructionism.

Deconstructionism is a method of analysis. It highlights inconsistencies or contradictions in received historical accounts, and recasts history with special emphasis on power dynamics, and a deemphasis of any ideals historical actors gave as their motivation for particular decisions. Associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, its most familiar expression would be Howard Zinn's [A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present](#).

A wise friend observed, "Deconstructionism robs meaning." It also imports a new and different meaning. As the late Cardinal [Francis George](#) wrote in his theology dissertation, "If the United States is not to be a beacon, the universally inclusive 'city on hill,' then it must be a sinkhole, the evil source of global exploitation."

Deconstructionism stands behind the decision by the San Francisco school district to [rename schools](#), including Abraham Lincoln and George Washington high schools. If the Christopher Columbus statue came down in your city, the impetus for that act started with deconstructionism. And don't even ask about Thanksgiving.

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No one should be content with the midcentury Hollywood version of history. "[Plymouth Adventure](#)," the 1952 movie about the Pilgrims starring Spencer Tracy and Gene Tierney, doesn't count as history. But, in their fierce anti-Catholic bigotry, their desire to be rid of papism and priestcraft, the Pilgrims and Puritans introduced conceptions about the human person that led one of them, Roger Williams, to articulate the then-radical idea of freedom of conscience.

Through more historical twists and turns, that idea became enshrined in our First Amendment. That is a good thing, even if the Puritans, and Americans since, have as often honored that idea by violating it as by fulfilling it. The idea is still a mark of a civilized society, and societies that deny religious freedom are not places any of us would want to live.

In short, history must be judged not by our moral terms, but by the circumstances and cultures of the time. None of us knows what future generations will think about our contemporary society, what will cause them, 200 or 300 years hence, to exclaim, "What were they thinking?"

Politically, trashing America's past is a fool's errand. People want to feel good about their country and there is plenty for Americans to feel good about it. We do not need to whitewash history, but we don't have to rant endlessly about the shortcomings of our ancestors either.

Humility is a second habit of mind the Democrats and the left need to learn, and it is never easy to come by. As I [noted at the time](#), the best part of Kamala Harris' speech at the Economic Club of Pittsburgh in September was her invocation of Franklin Roosevelt and his promise of "bold, persistent experimentation." Democrats need to propose and discuss public policy in a less doctrinaire and more pragmatic key.

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Hartford, Connecticut, is the capital of my state and the city still suffers from the decisions made by urban planners in the 1950s. They misunderstood how the automobile would change urban life. The downtown area is a ghost town after 6 p.m. Hartford is not alone. Many cities suffered from the hubris of urban planners in the postwar years.

Republicans criticize the Democrats' "War on Poverty," which gave us food stamps and Medicaid and the Fair Housing Act. Republicans say poverty won that war. They are wrong, but there were unintended consequences to policies like the Fair Housing Act.

That law allowed middle-class and upper-middle-class black Americans to move out of the inner city and into the suburbs like their white co-workers had, an obvious win

for justice. But, as a consequence, much of the social capital that had anchored inner-city neighborhoods moved out with them. Combined with economic changes, especially the loss of blue-collar jobs, the plight of urban America took on new urgency.

Bill Clinton really thought the North American Free Trade Agreement, retraining workers, and more community colleges would help working-class Americans. It was the '90s. History had ended, at least [according to Francis Fukuyama](#). The internet was changing almost everything and maybe it would lift all boats.

Alas, many boats were left behind. The Democrats' loss of working-class voters accelerated with NAFTA.

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In this hyper-ideological age, people get exhausted with the shouting. Pragmatism, which is as deeply engrained in the American psyche as any trait, brings a welcome lowering of ideological fervor. And humility permits Democrats to propose new and ambitious policies without hubris.

If it doesn't work, we'll try something else. That is how my vet approaches a treatment for my dog and how my auto mechanic approaches fixing my car. A little humility would go a long way towards making the Democratic Party less scary.

Finally, there is humor. "Whom the gods would make bigots, they first deprive of humor," wrote [Fr. James Gillis](#), the Paulist editor of the Catholic World from 1922 to 1957. Yes, cultural elites on the left speak about working-class voters in ways that are bigoted.

Not every Trump voter is a Proud Boy or a racist or a misogynist, but they are labeled as such. A large part of the reason is that working-class conversations are often filled with humor about sex and gender and race, humor that would get one barred from the faculty lounge or fired.

Humor is often used to discuss fraught issues. Sometimes it is coarse. But when I am with my working-class friends, I do not detect meanness in the humor. Their jokes are like [the humor of Dave Chappelle](#), and they often repeat his routines. His social criticism about race and gender is brilliant. He is not "transphobic" or "racist." He uses humor to discuss complicated, highly charged issues. He is edgy, but his humor

is not mean.

History, humility and humor. The cultural left that dominates the Democratic Party needs to use all three to connect with voters, not to judge them.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)