

When Indignation Trumps Information

By George Will

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WASHINGTON – "Physician, heal yourself," said the founder of the church in which Roger Mahony is a cardinal. He is the Catholic archbishop of Los Angeles and he should heed the founder's admonition before accusing Arizonans of intemperateness. He says Arizona's new law pertaining to illegal immigration involves "reverting to German Nazi and Russian Communist techniques whereby people are required to turn one another in to the authorities on any suspicion of documentation."

"Our highest priority today," he says, "is to bring calm and reasoning to discussions about our immigrant brothers and sisters." His idea of calm reasoning is to call Arizona's new law for coping with illegal immigration "the country's most retrogressive, mean-spirited, and useless anti-immigrant law." He also says it is "dreadful," "abhorrent" and a "tragedy," and its assumption is that "immigrants come to our country to rob, plunder and consume public resources."

The problem of illegal immigration is inflaming Mahony, who strongly implies, as advocates for illegal immigrants often do, that any law intended to reduce such illegality is "anti-immigrant." The implication is: Because most Americans believe such illegality should be reduced, most Americans are against immigrants. This slur is slain by abundant facts -- polling data that show Americans simultaneously committed to controlling the nation's southern border and to welcoming legal immigration.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, said, "And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Mahony uncharitably judges Arizona legislators and the constituents they represent to be "mean-spirited." His evident assumption, one quite common today, is that certain ideas cannot be held by any intelligent person of good will.

But what does -- what can -- Mahony mean by asserting that Arizona's law is "useless"? He must believe either it will have no effect on illegal immigration or that any effect must be without social value. He can know neither to be true.

Late night comedians, recalling World War II movies in which Gestapo officers demand "show me your papers," find echoes of fascism in Arizona's belief that there are occasions when police officers can reasonably ask for someone's documentation. On Tuesday, Barack Obama, showing contempt for the professionalism and character of police officers, said: "Now suddenly if you don't have your papers and you took your kid out to get ice cream, you're going to be harassed."

Time was, presidents were held to higher standards than comedians. Today's liberals favor indignation over information, but lawyer Obama must know that since 1952 federal law has said: "Every alien, eighteen years of age and over, shall at all times carry with him and have

in his personal possession any certificate of alien registration or alien registration receipt card issued to him."

In today's debate, the threshold question is: Should the nation have immigration laws? Until 1875, there were none. There are strict libertarians who believe there should be none. But the vast majority who do not favor completely open borders believe there should be some laws restricting who can become residents, and presumably they believe such laws should be enforced.

Once Americans are satisfied that the borders are secure, the immigration policies they will favor will reflect their -- and the law enforcement profession's -- healthy aversion to the measures that would be necessary to remove from the nation the nearly 11 million illegal immigrants, 60 percent of whom have been here for more than five years. It would take 200,000 buses in a bumper-to-bumper convoy 1,700 miles long to carry them back to the border. Americans are not going to seek and would not tolerate the police methods that would be needed to round up and deport the equivalent of the population of Ohio.

Meanwhile, hysteria about domestic fascism is unhelpful, even though it is a liberal tradition. In his 1944 State of the Union address, FDR identified opponents of his domestic agenda as fascists. Declaring that his "one supreme objective" was "security," including "economic security, social security, moral security," he issued a dire warning: Woodrow Wilson's progressive policies had been frustrated by "rightist reaction" and "if history were to repeat itself and we were to return to the so-called 'normalcy' of the 1920s -- then it is certain that even though we shall have conquered our enemies on the battlefields abroad, we shall have yielded to the spirit of Fascism here at home."

Today's hysterics are unoriginal. But they learned their bad manners from a master.