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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Don't talk down to the masses

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Every November, I see more hope for America's future in students at the University of Texas. In the last weeks of the fall semester, my ancient Greek history class examines the last decades of the fifth century BCE, when ancient Athens reached its peak as a cultural force and the Athenians used their imperial power brutally - as Pericles, the elitist statesman who shaped Athenian policies for 30 years, reminded them they must - in order to sustain the Athenian "politeia" or way of life.

I made my second sentence here convoluted for a reason. It mirrors the difficult syntax, vocabulary and reasoning of Pericles' speeches, as presented by the Athenian historian Thucydides. Pericles did not dumb down his thoughts or his words because he was addressing, on the occasion of his most famous speech, the common citizens of Athens. They were gathered in 431 BCE at a public funeral to honor Athenian soldiers who had died in the first year of a war that many believed Pericles' policies had started.

Many grieving Athenians were illiterate or barely literate. Few had any formal education. Most worked hard at farming or trades and had little time for intellectual activities. All adult male citizens, and many resident aliens, served long periods in the military, too. Papyrus or parchment books were rare and expensive. Schools were virtually nonexistent.

Still Pericles did not "Palinize" his message. He spoke like the intellectual he was. He did not answer the opponents who blamed him for bringing on the war by attacking them with false claims, by calling them un-Athenian or the Greek equivalent of socialists or terrorists. He respected the living and the dead.

Last week, 10 students in my class volunteered to study Pericles' funeral oration carefully and reenact it aloud for their fellow students. All 10 delivered Pericles' historic words, compared by Garry Wills to Lincoln's Gettysburg address in their oratorical power and cultural significance, clearly and forcefully, despite the crabbed sentence structure and many abstract ideas.

We listened for inspiration to recordings of Martin Luther King's last speech and Robert Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis after King was assassinated. Those two speeches from April 1968 are amazing for the honesty with which King and Kennedy speak.

King tells the direct truth about racism in the United States and worldwide. Effective community organizing and speaking the truth to the long-standing power of ignorance and prejudice made King a target for a white man with a rifle. In Greek, a "martyr" is a witness. King was that.

Kennedy tells black Americans at what was supposed to be a primary campaign rally that King was killed and that he feels their grief and anger. His own brother, Kennedy says, was gunned down by a white man.

Neither King nor Kennedy talks down. Neither fuels righteous anger or legitimate fears. Neither pretends our country is other than what it is, an ongoing experiment in democratic government with many hidden and not so hidden problems, even beyond racism. They knew we have enough real problems without inventing others for short-term political gains.

Kennedy quotes "my favorite poet Aeschylus." King speaks about Aristophanes and Euripides, names many in his audience would never have heard before. King and Kennedy empowered their fellow citizens by respecting the intelligence of even those with little education. Likewise, Pericles expects and exhorts all citizens to be informed and active in politics.

Pericles, King and Kennedy make no appeals to the baser instincts of their audiences. King and Kennedy know, as James Brown once sang in an extemporaneous autobiographical song about the racism and poverty he experienced in his life, that "we're dealing with ignorance. That's the key." A society cannot fight ignorance by exploiting ignorance and, as King and Kennedy also knew, we inspire hatred by speaking hatefully.

UT students Keeley Folan, Madeleyne Afananador, Kendra Kaderka, Emily Jones, Kelly Hickman, Erin Wolff, Jillian Rae Sheridan, Andrea Gaspar, Jared Jones and Derek Dahman know these lessons of history and are already using them to help their fellow citizens think seriously about their civic responsibilities.

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