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Charles Krauthammer

Clarence Thomas and the Liberal Orthodoxy

In retrospect, it is clear that the Bork Supreme Court nomination was the opening battle of the modern PC ("political correctness") war. Remember: The charge against Bork by those who eventually voted him down was never "I don't agree with his political views." That, of course, was the essence of the opposition to Bork, but even his opponents maintained publicly that it is improper grounds on which to disqualify a Supreme Court nominee. (Whether or not it ought to be is another question.)

Instead, the charge against Bork was that he was not qualified to sit on the highest court. Not that he was intellectually unqualified—on that basis, he was then and remains now probably the most highly qualified jurist in the country—but "temperamentally" unfit. A new charge was minted that became the basis for his rejection by the Senate: he was "out of the mainstream," i.e., a political extremist unfit for high office.

The attack on Bork was the first live-fire exercise of that essential, now familiar PC weapon: stigmatizing as illegitimate those views (particularly views on race, gender and sexuality) that do not conform to current liberal orthodoxy. Dissenters are not just considered conservative, but out of the mainstream. Forty years ago, the word was un-American.

On a world scale, the tyranny to which such dissenters are subjected is fairly mild. You don't get put into the gulag. No one prevents you from going on the lecture circuit. You are a welcome guest on the chat shows. But you may not hold high office.

Even not so high office. Critic Carol Iannone was nominated last September to the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For months now she has been the subject of intense attack by the politically correct literary establishment (the Modern Language Association, PEN, American Council of Learned Societies etc.). Here again, those trying to block her nomination don't say they object because she is politically conservative and writes articles with which they disagree in places like Commentary. They say she is unqualified.

The basis of her unqualification? The charge that she does not have the requisite academic credentials is a phony. She holds a PhD in literature and has taught it for 20 years. She is a full-time faculty member at New York University. Her real offense is having written that several books authored by blacks have been honored with awards not on merit but as a form of literary reparation.

The issue at stake in the Iannone nomination is whether it will be impermissible in this country to say such a thing. Rejection would mean that the public discussion of racial bias will be regulated by the liberal establishment. The public discussion of discrimination against minorities is highly encouraged. The discussion of discrimination in favor of minorities is highly dangerous: it may be deemed such an act of deviance as to render the dissident unfit for public office.

Now, however, yet another fight in the PC wars is looming, and if the Bork nomination was Fort Sumter this one looks to be Gettysburg. The nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court may turn out to be a decisive battle over whether certain conservative views will continue to be delegitimized as outside the American mainstream.

That is why one senses a certain agitation and uneasiness among the forces now mobilizing against Thomas. Defeating the Bork nomination whetted their appetite and gave them a sense of their own strength. But the growing popular backlash against PC has made them doubt whether they can hold on to their gains. The Thomas nomination will be the test. The real issue in the Thomas nomination is whether a black who is conservative can be part of the American mainstream.

Thomas opposes racial preferences for groups. (Though as Juan Williams pointed out in an insightful 1987 profile in The Atlantic, he strongly favors remedial action for individual cases of discrimination.) He is therefore said to be against civil rights. But it is a travesty to call someone like Thomas, who believes in colorblindness (which is what Hubert Humphrey, Martin Luther King Jr. and most Americans believe in), an opponent of civil rights.

The other line of attack on Thomas will be abortion. Thomas has been less outspoken on the issue, but the suspicion is that he would overturn Roe v. Wade. The country is deeply divided on abortion, and even some supporters of legalization (like me) think Roe was gross judicial usurpation. Yet Thomas's adversaries will try to paint him as a right-wing zealot on abortion as well as the mainstream.

Roe has far more popular support in the country than racial preferences. That is why Thomas's opponents would prefer to wage their campaign by focusing on abortion and other "privacy rights." They would prefer to dupe a fight on racial preferences because it could turn politically disastrous for Democrats. They are terrified of the "quota party" label.

Yet in the end it will be so important to liberals to bring down Thomas that I suspect we will see even this kind of Pickett's charge in favor of racial preferences. Thomas is a living threat. His confirmation would repeal the current official recognition of the civil rights establishment as the sole legitimate representative of black people in America. It would symbolically affirm that black conservatism is a respected and respectable current of the American mainstream. Most important, it would mean that black or white, rich or poor, even the politically incorrect can aspire to serve on the highest court in the land.