

Smell Something Burning?

It's Probably Arizona

Eric K. Ward

July 8, 2008

Did you ever play the “If I had lived during [insert appropriate historic period here] I would have ...” game? Back when I was a kid my friends and I would sit in a tight circle often with popsicles juice running down our fingers while we discussed how each of us would have reacted to the Great Chicago Fire, escaped the Titanic, survived in the Land of the Lost, or ran bootleg rum from Canada, though I’m sure we didn’t even know what rum was.

As we grew older the game changed and took on even more significance. It was no longer made up of fantasies of how I would have invested in Disney and made it rich. Instead, I thought about how I might imagine myself reacting to important moments in U.S. history. Actually it was just one moment that fascinated me, the one called the Civil Rights Movement. “Would I have been able to keep my cool desegregating a lunch counter?” “Could I have worked up the courage and registered to vote knowing that I might get a visit from the Klan that evening?” Would I have left the comfortable confines of college to spend my summer in a place that very well might cost me my life?”

Of course I was always full of bravado about what I “would have done” if given the chance, but I made these boasts from the comfort of the present — a nice place to explore “what if?” and “what may?” I don’t think I’m alone in this and I still think many still wonder what they might have done had they been in places called Selma, Montgomery, Jackson and Boston.

In Arizona, like the tattered pages of an old paperback, the wondering is long over. With over 181 bodies recovered in the deserts in 2007, fifty five pieces of anti-immigrant legislation to be submitted in 2008, and a local Sheriff who resembles Bull Connor (a southern police officer and KKK member in the 1960’s) more than Wyatt Earp, Arizona is becoming to immigrants rights, what Mississippi was to the 1960s civil rights movement—a defining moment in which each of us will be called to either embrace inhumanity or redeem the soul of America.

While I still wonder what I might do, others are acting. From day laborers in Phoenix, Arizona, who face down the Sheriff and his posse because they know that work is not a crime, to community members in Flagstaff, Arizona who were detained last weekend for “disturbing the peace” because they dared to honor the very meaning of the 4th of July by joining the annual 4th of July parade.

Kaitlyn Fahrenbruch a spokesperson with The Coalition to Repeal took part in the 4th of July Parade with seven others to deliver a declaration of their own (click to watch video). “Our goal is

the repeal all anti-immigrant laws; federal, state and local,” says Fahrenbruch “We were marching in the defense of freedom for all people to live, love, and work anywhere they please” she said. Is the message extreme? Maybe it seems extreme to me, but then I remember English King George didn’t take it very well when he was told a similar message about us celebrating American Independence each year on the 4th of July.

Beyond the debate on the economic pros and cons of immigration, I think The Coalition to Repeal has realized something that I had forgotten. That hundreds of people dying in the desert each year is extreme, children coming home to empty kitchens where parents have disappeared is extreme, beings jailed for seeking work is extreme. Asking that each individual in our society be treated with basic human decency is not—it is as American as apple pie. It’s what we have been seeking since 1776.

What would I have done had I lived in the 1960s? I guess I don’t have to wonder anymore. Arizona, here I come!

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