

COMMENTARY

The honest parade

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I almost made it to the Swamp Cabbage Festival parade in LaBelle last week, but not quite.

So I had to rely on first-hand accounts. I was told on good authority that one of the floats celebrated the Seminole Indians: those red-skinned symbols, to some of us, of enduring courage and never-say-die nativism in the face of blue-coated or buck-skinned or rag-tag 19th-century Imperialists, known as soldiers or pioneers or crackers.

The story is famous now, in politically correct circles.

First, we pushed them south out of Georgia or points north in the Creek wars, and then we tried to push them out of the swamp, or more precisely, into the swamp here, forever. When I say “we,” I mean the evolving U.S. government, which is you and me, after all. (Notice that we’ve evolved from the Seminole wars to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars through a variety of other wars, which is proof that evolution is real, it’s worth teaching in school, and it’s obviously not very impressive as a system of progress.)

We starved those Seminole Indians, and probably had some fun doing it. We chased them, burned them out, and shot them. But in the end, we failed completely to eradicate them.

“Failure is not an option” must not have

been the guiding principal of the U.S. government or the U.S. Army at the time, like it is of the Bush administration — not after the first Seminole Indian war in 1817-1818, a second particularly bloody one from 1835 to 1842, and the final one, from 1855 to 1858. They whipped our tails, which is defined as standing right where they chose to stand, sort of — those who were left — after we sent in some serious guns.

After that, we flat gave up, just as we did in Vietnam, and just as we will do in Iraq, unless the enemy is too stupid to avoid escalating that war, instead of continually picking away at us. (If they escalate, whoever “they” are, they’re going to lose. They may or may not be that dumb.)

So the Vietnam War was not the first war we “lost,” although baby-boomers and many historians told themselves that. Nope. It was the Seminole Indian wars, and we lost three of them back to back. They were the first, and Vietnam will not be the last.

But let me go back to Saturday night in LaBelle, Florida, U.S.A., 2008.

Friends of mine alert to this very history watched the proud Seminole float pass. It was not an in-your-face affair, they said, but a road-show remembrance of a fierce and enduring culture.

That float reminded the crowd, I suspect, that the Seminoles were what they were, and also that they are what they are: one, a people greatly enriched by a casino. Two, not quite subject to all the laws of the land, since their hunting and fishing and gambling privileges exceed ours. And three, willing and smart enough to put a float in the Imperialist’s parade and claim to be undefeated.

But the really neat thing about the parade

in LaBelle was that right behind the Seminole float appeared the pioneer float.

On the pioneer float, apparently, people dressed like pioneers were (I won’t even consider putting this delicately) SHOOTING AT INDIANS.

I was delighted to learn this. Thank God there is still one place, at least, where crackers or their ilk can still shoot at Indians, without apology.

I, myself, have spent a great deal of time shooting at Indians, and I don’t feel like apologizing for it, either. On the contrary, I remember the experience as one of great pleasure, especially on a summer night when my friend, Roy Petersen, was the Indian in question, and I didn’t have to be.

The Indian always got killed, in a spectacular fashion by a rifle shot that defied all the odds of shooting and even the realities of physics.

And by the time my mother rang the cowbell out the back door, which meant get in from the dusk and get in the bathtub or the bed, all was right with the world, if you were a “cowboy,” and not an Indian.

That was so long ago, in America.

Then suddenly I learn that right here in river city — on a Saturday night in LaBelle, on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River (and those poor quitters, the Calusa, didn’t even have the grit or the good manners to survive the Spanish so we could get some pleasure out of shooting at them, too) — a bunch of living, breathing Labelle white-folk still celebrate the world according to the cowboy-and-Indian model that I understood from the 1950s and ‘60s.

You won’t find that in Lee County, much. You have to go to Hendry County to find it.

Yessir, once upon a time, if you were tough enough, and brave enough, and civilized enough, and handy enough with a

rifle, and you were a “cowboy,” especially if nobody shot back at you and your mother had a hot supper ready when you finished fighting Indians, you were Right.

Often, history goes to the guy with the biggest mouth, and we were the guys with the biggest mouths, and the biggest guns. So we were Right.

Unfortunately for my own sense of comfort, as I grew older some other information seeped in from time to time (I let that happen as infrequently as possible) and my comfort with things as I had once understood them began to diminish.

Still, when I heard about the parade in LaBelle, I felt pretty good about it. It occurred to me that these LaBellians may be the most unflinching of historians. We did shoot at Indians, and we did kill many of them, including women and children, and we did take pleasure in it — pleasure of some kind, even if just a pleasant sense of justified ambition and greed, which good parades always help to confirm.

Those are demonstrable truths, historically. So here were a bunch of LaBellians who refused to flinch in the face of that history. They were telling it like it was, from both vantages — the Crackers and the Seminoles. The cowboys and the Indians.

And I think that telling it like it is, without apology, is the best thing we could do. (Okay, maybe with a little apology.)

Does this mean I want to hear about some happy Germans parading through Buchenwald on a Saturday night with floats that depict Nazis shooting Jews?

No. It doesn’t mean that.

So what’s the difference, besides a difference in degree and malice by an entire people? I don’t know. If you do, let me know.

But I still like the notion of an honest parade. ■

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