

## John Leo: Principle and Prescience

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When I learned that John Leo had retired as editor-in-chief of *Minding the Campus*, my thoughts leaped to T.S. Eliot’s final prayer at the end of Ash Wednesday: “Suffer me not to be separated.” The news came as a wrench, a decisive twist to the bolt on a repository of shaping memories. His writing was at the center of much that had stamped my wits and my interests over decades.

The man entered my life through a Xeroxed copy of his December 1, 1965 column in the *National Catholic Reporter*. It had been handed to me by a Fordham student on the sidewalk outside the Catholic Peace Fellowship on Beekman Street. As much a *j’accuse* against the New York chancery as a brief in support of Daniel Berrigan, S.J., it was a rousing thing to read.

A Jesuit provincial had just ordered the charismatic activist/poet/priest out of the country for his role in the anti-war movement. In passionate defense of Fr. Berrigan, Leo opened with a description of him as “one of the most Christ-like men I have ever met,” one who “disturbed the slumber of lesser men.” He called Berrigan a “marked man” hounded by “a naked and arrogant exercise in authoritarianism.”

The column was intoxicating to an idealistic Catholic-schooled girl high on Yeats: *The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/the ceremony of innocence is drowned*. For so many of my generation at the time, Berrigan presided as the conscience of the innocent. And squinting through the prism of youthful conceit, we saw lesser men slumbering everywhere.

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Cardinal Spellman was an outspoken hawk on the Vietnam War; Dan Berrigan spoke otherwise. His reassignment to Latin America for a mandatory cooling off was believed to have been the Cardinal's doing. Leo's "Thinking It Over: The Case of Fr. Berrigan" appeared together with a front page story in the same issue of *NCR*. A *cause celebre* was launched. Eleven days later, the *New York Times* followed with an open letter to the archdiocese and New York's Jesuit community. Signers were a stellar roster of Catholic intellectuals.

To this reader, in that day, Leo's column brought Catholicism alive as something more than a system of inherited beliefs. Suddenly, it became interesting.

Historian Rodger Van Allen has since denied Spellman's responsibility for Berrigan's exile. (He pronounced it an in-house Jesuit affair, one the Cardinal simply lacked the appetite to oppose.) Moreover, hindsight gave cause to regret the cult around Berrigan. Idolization of the "holy outlaw" has proven as flawed as the priest's own affiliation with Howard Zinn. Nonetheless, Leo's militant defense of his friend was principled and exemplary.

His anger at what was reasonably understood at the time as an abuse of episcopal authority was matched by a strong sense of loyalty. His comment to Berrigan after the expulsion directive arrived has stayed with me over the years: "We'll take care of your cause. We'll take care of getting the truth out."

*Getting the truth out.* That is key. Leo's allegiance was more than personal. It was ethical, a fidelity to the truth of things. In the end—as it ever was in the beginning—that is the mainspring of the essayist's vocation. And before anything else, the man is an essayist. His writing life has been a consistent attempt—an *essai*—to extract meaning from events that might otherwise be taken for granted. Along the way, he fired away at the imperious gall of Those Who Know Better.

My much thumbed hard cover edition of *Two Steps Ahead of the Thought Police*, a collection of previously published essays, has kept me company since it appeared in 1994. I love these pieces, most from *U.S. News and World Report*, for their prescience, candor, and—as any writer will concede—their underlineability,

Begin with prescience. "Whitney to Whitey: Drop Dead," was a response to the Whitney Museum's 1993 biennial, a self-satisfied romp into agit-prop. Admission buttons extended the tenor of it onto the lapels of the paying public. Some were printed with the legend "I CAN'T IMAGINE WANTING TO BE WHITE"; the other three bore fragments of that sentence. In sum, the exhibition showcased the Whitney's embrace of what, in the art world's bloodless argot, was hailed as *institutional critique*. Leo put it more bluntly: "the itch to harangue." And to debase:

In two numbing hours at this organized shambles, I learned that the world is neatly divided into good and bad. Good: women, non-whites, homosexuals, transvestites, gang members, glory holes, people with AIDS, gays in the military. Bad: America, straight white males, family, religion, hierarchies, lipstick, liposuction, fatism, and penises not attached to gay men.

His discussion leap-frogged over the scripted pieties of docents. It ignored the exhibition catalogue's conceptual fustian and drove straight to the point of the project:

It is about replacing the center (mainstream America and its values) with the margin (the race-and-gender ideologues and their allies). . . . In other words, it's about a cultural war to destabilize and break the mainstream.

A prophecy clearly stated, the entire commentary was also a lesson in good writing. John Leo was not an ordained art critic. That means he was able to *see* what he was looking at. His vista unclouded by the higher obscurities of art talk, he was free to tell plainly what was in front of him. Whatever the topic, Leo's prose was tart, often playful, ruled by clarity and logic. He brought to his writing a moral outlook that took the measure of those hypocrisies, stupidities, and stealth objectives that litter the route of the Gramscian march.

By the time I became a card-carrying member of the International Association of Art Critics, I had learned from Leo how not to be an art critic. At least, not to sound like one. Leo's voice as a writer was both sober and witty, a reminder that for any argument to be effective, it must be accessible to general readers. At the same time, it has to keep its heft, not fudge its commitments. Despite an even hand when needed, Leo knew which side he was on.

How did Emerson put it? "Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes." Just so. If only more of us had acted on what we heard.

In July the *Spectator.US* ran a polished reflection on the slide of the F-word from curse to commonplace. A latecomer, I thought. Surely someone had detected this slippage long before now. Sure enough, a quick check into *Two Steps Ahead* turned up "The F-Word Flows Like Ketchup." In the early Nineties, Leo declared it "all around us now, like air pollution." His perp-walk of F-addicts included even the *New Yorker*, once "a hotbed of decorum and taste" but now "a victim of fashion, a breathless dowager slipping into her first punk miniskirt."

The sentences are delicious; the verdict unyielding. Robert Gottlieb, former editor of the *New Yorker*, admitted the magazine "had no policy at all" on the F-word and he had "never given it a moment's thought."

Unintimidated by being deemed *judgmental*—the last taboo—Leo countered:

That's just the problem. When you get to be the editor of the *New Yorker*, you're supposed to spend a minute thinking about standards. Maybe even two.

Behind that simple word *supposed* lies trust in the existence of a proper order in pursuit of good ends. Call it truth, the stable beam from which a scale of values can be weighed. A subtle indictment, the passage implies that Gottlieb's detachment was as heavy a thumb on the cultural scale as outright intention.

Writing in the 1930s, Orwell had feared that objective truth, even the concept of it, was fading out of the culture. He feared that media-driven lies would pass into history: "in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts . . . I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed."

We live in just such a time, one in which "fake news" is a weapon against reality and the language that honors it. *1984's goodthink* anticipated what we call political correctness. Low-keyed and lucid, Leo's columns carried forward Orwell's warning against this stranglehold on the free play of the mind. And its consequent suffocation of veracity.

Chapter headings in *Two Steps Ahead* are a striking litany of *déjà-vu*-all-over-again. Is it that we refused to learn? Or that we were complacent? Just not angry enough? From racial arithmetic and vilification of white males to the politics of date rape, abortion, toxic feminism, multiculturalism, and more, today's concerns were all there, autopsied in trenchant columns a quarter century ago.

Today's vile exegesis of whiteness at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African History and Culture ought not surprise. In the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1994, Leo alerted us to "the politically correct makeover under way" at the various tentacles of the Smithsonian. Preparing an exhibition on American participation in the Pacific Theatre of World War II, the Air and Space Museum argued that "America was conducting a racist war of vengeance against Japan, while for most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism."

[A] stilted view of the war and American motives, running through hundreds of pages of early draft versions of the show, was bound to attract attention from veterans and historians who knew better.

But the same dark view of America as arrogant, oppressive, racist and destructive increasingly runs through the Smithsonian complex. . . . Part of the new Smithsonian strategy is to keep stressing the negatives.

Out of the starting gate, Leo's writing took aim at bureaucratic tyranny, those totalitarian impulses that seep like corrosive salt into our institutions and our lives. It unnerves me to realize the degree to which his cautions are still needed.

Parental control over sex education—to pick just one arena—has plummeted since Leo's "Over The Head of Parents" forewarned a wide audience in candid detail. He asked: "When you send your child to a state school, do you yield all authority over the child's sexual education?" It was a rhetorical question leading up to an unambiguous answer: *Yes!* Today, Abigail Shrier's newly published *Irreversible Damage* quotes a fifth grade teacher's attitude toward parents who object to indoctrination in transgender ideology. "That's nice, but their parental rights ended when those children were enrolled in public school."

John Leo saw our snowflakes coming. Contemporary college students are descendants of the self-esteem juggernaut. What he termed "the politics of feeling" has created a generation of Fabergé eggs who need incubation in safe spaces, shielded from insensitivity and microaggression by trigger warnings and speech codes.

The use of feelings as a trump card is becoming pervasive. The codes and laws generated by the campus-based race and gender alliance are aimed at real problems. But almost all are disastrously rooted in the demand that there must be no negative feelings. If there are, as is so often the case when the individual collides with the real world, then someone must be penalized for it.

He rejected the notion that it was the state's job to pat our chests and help us think nice things about ourselves. To the notion of self-esteem as a public policy issue, well . . . no thanks:

To keep children feeling good about themselves, you must avoid all criticism and almost any challenge that could conceivably end in failure. . . . This means each child is treated like a fragile therapy consumer in constant need of an ego-boost. Difficult work is out of the question, and standards get lowered . . . Even tests become problematic because someone might fail them.

A quarter century later, the "blissed out mental surfers" of California are in the lead to abolish the ACT and SAT.

Our "news" has taken over what was once the job of churches: instilling guilt. It does its best to deliver material that feeds mainstream consumers a rationale to

berate themselves for being mainstream. Leo objected when he saw it. “Demonizing White Males,” for example, gave early warning of the crusade to put heterosexual white men—“the male and pale”—in the dock:

Like the guerrillas moving down from the hills to attack the cities, the race-and-gender people are no longer just sniping from marginal positions on campus and in the art world. With the aid of an ever-credulous press corps, they are now pumping their doctrine into the general culture. . . . America will increasingly be divided by a truculent tribalism, with nonwhites and white women ganging up in a grand alliance to wrest power from white males.  
. . . The race-and-gender folk will bear watching.

Now we know: we were not watchful enough.

I think of John Leo’s working life as a summons to accountability. It has been a call issued to each of us, ordinary observers, to heed what we see. To take seriously what passes by. And to tell the truth about it.