

# Identity, False and True, in the U.S.

by Michael Curtis



**To thine own self be true**, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. This wholesome advice has become more significant and more difficult in our age with individuals differing and asserting those differences in age, religion, class, religion, culture, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, and residence. This is part of identity politics which results from individual acceptance of political opinions and proposals of social groups with which people identify.

Identity politics is not new, but in the present age it is to a considerable degree replacing the politics of ideas, especially among younger people. It stems from the assumption and the reality that some groups in cases such as race, sexual orientation, civil rights, and ethnicity are oppressed, that individuals in those groups are subjected to discrimination,

and therefore they can best express themselves and exercise political strength by acceptance of group identity.

Whatever the considerable advantages of adhering to identity politics, there are troubling problems. Marginalized groups may become more assertive, but by emphasizing differences, they may harm themselves. In the U.S., identity politics is largely tied to partisan politics, since Democrats are more likely to be supportive than Republicans of immigration and racial equality. Moreover, can identity politics be equated with the reality that individuals have multiple types of identities including racial, ethnic, religious, demographic, thus making a single sense of purpose and meaning more uncertain?

This instability or uncertainty of identity was illustrated in the unusual book *Orlando*, perhaps confessional, by Virginia Woolf that portrays instability by constant gender change: "If there are 76 different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not ...all having lodgment in one time or another in the human spirit."

But a major problem of reliance on identity politics is that it has been misused for personal advantage both to avoid criticism or punishment, and for obtaining benefits. This form of hoax is separate from the perennial issue, almost an occupational disease of politicians, of lying for political or personal advantage.

I'm coming Virginia I'm coming to stay, don't hold it against me for running away. I tried to forget you but found I was wrong. This was the message of the three male musketeers of the ruling group playing their role in the travesty of politics in the Commonwealth of Virginia. All three have misremembered, forgotten, or belatedly remembered aspects of their controversial past, and perfect identity still eludes them.

The Governor of the state of Virginia, Ralph Northam, has memory problems about a photo from a medical school year book of costumes taken at a party in medical school days in 1984. The photo contained two figures, one in blackface, the other in hooded KKK robes. Northam, after first acknowledging he was one of the characters in the photo, then denied he was either of them.

Falsehoods in politics have short durations. On May 17, 2010 the *New York Times* published the story that Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, currently running for the Senate, had falsely claimed on a number of occasions, he had served in U.S. forces in Vietnam. In fact, he had never done so, but received at least five deferments that kept him out of the war zone. Blumenthal did later enlist in the Marine Reserve that kept him in Washington, D.C. He was elected Senator (Dem) in 2010, and said he had "misspoken," about his military service. Moreover, he had benefitted from his inaccurate picture of his military service. In fact, in the relevant years he finished at Harvard on March 3, 2008, spent a year as a graduate at Trinity College Cambridge, and was later at Yale Law School.

Lying of course is not confined to public officials to achieve fame or success. Rosie Ruiz, Cuban American, born in Havana, was declared the winner in the female part of Boston Marathon in 1980 but the title was quickly taken away when it was discovered she had cheated. She had not run the whole course, but only about half a mile before the finish line. Her skill came in bending the truth, not in running.

The case is more amusing of a skillful trickster, Frank Abagnale, a New York businessman, supposedly a security consultant. In fact, he was really an imposter who claimed to have assumed at least eight identities. As a result, he spent less than five years of a 12 year term in prison for fraud and forgery, before working for the FBI academy and field offices. His unique story, as fake pilot, teacher, physician, attorney,

is told in the film *Catch Me if You Can*, starring Leonardo di Caprio.

However amusing or diverting these misdemeanors, a serious problem has risen by the abuse of identity politics to gain advantages. There recent examples will suffice. Senator Elizabeth Warren (Mass), Jussie Smollett, Chicago actor, and former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

Senator Warren has given contradictory accounts of her ancestry as a Native American and the real color of her skin. The crucial question is whether she deliberately lied about her supposed Native American heritage in order, on the basis of affirmative action, to get appointments at U. of Pennsylvania Law School and Harvard Law School.

A few documents show she registered at the State Bar of Texas as "American Indian." DNA tests showed that examining ten generations back, Warren is 1/512<sup>th</sup> Native American. The Senator has apologized, after a fashion, for "not having been more sensitive about tribal citizenship and tribal sovereignty." She is more sensitive about electoral politics and remains a presidential candidate.

A second case is that of Jussie Smollett, African-American and openly gay, star of the hit TV show *Empire*. Smollett told Chicago police he was beaten by two masked men in the morning of January 29, 2019, who shouted at him that this was MAGA (aka Trump) country. At first, he was believed as a crime victim of racism and homophobia, but then two brothers, the alleged assailants, confessed it was a hoax and that they were paid \$3,500 by Smollett to pretend to attack him.

Smollett was suspended by 20th Century Fox, owners of the program, from further episodes in *Empire*, and he was removed from the last scenes in which he had performed.

What is disturbing is not simply the lying of Smollett,

abusing the racial identification, presumably to get a higher salary on his TV show, but also the alacrity with which some political figures , many potential presidential candidates, and celebrities, among them Sen. Cory Booker, (Dem-NJ,) Julian Castro, Hispanic mayor of San Antonio, Texas, and former HUD Secretary ,Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Kamala Harris, at first, supported Smollett's version of events because of supposed "racist, homophobic" attack on him. The best comment on this ongoing case has been made by Sen. Harris, who retracted her original support of Smollett. On February 21, 2019, Harris commented that Smollett's behavior distracted from the truth of the increase in hate crimes in the U.S., and makes it more difficult for other victims of such crimes to come forward.

The third case is rather depressing. The former U.S. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, 88 year-old former Archbishop of Washington, and Archbishop of Newark, was on February 15, 2019 defrocked (laicized) by Pope Francis over allegations of sexual misconduct including while hearing confession, now ordered by the Pope to a life of prayer and penance in seclusion, expelled from the Roman Catholic priesthood, dismissal from the clerical state, after a canonical investigation. He was found guilty of sins against the Sixth commandment with sins against both minors and adults of the Catholic church. McCarrick is probably the first Cardinal to be defrocked for sexual misconduct.

To thine own self be true. Farewell, my blessed season this in thee.