

Hold Your Heads Up

By **BOB HERBERT**

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Ignorance must really be bliss. How else, over so many years, could the G.O.P. get away with ridiculing all things liberal?

Troglodytes on the right are no respecters of reality. They say the most absurd things and hardly anyone calls them on it. Evolution? Don't you believe it. Global warming? A figment of the liberal imagination.

Liberals have been so cowed by the pummeling they've taken from the right that they've tried to shed their own identity, calling themselves everything but liberal and hoping to pass conservative muster by presenting themselves as hyper-religious and lifelong lovers of rifles, handguns, whatever.

So there was Hillary Clinton, of all people, sponsoring legislation to ban flag-burning; and Barack Obama, who once opposed the death penalty, morphing into someone who not only supports it, but supports it in cases that don't even involve a homicide.

Anyway, the Republicans were back at it last week at their convention. Mitt Romney wasn't content to insist that he personally knows that "liberals don't have a clue." He complained loudly that the federal government right now is too liberal.

"We need change, all right," he said. "Change from a liberal Washington to a conservative Washington."

Why liberals don't stand up to this garbage, I don't know. Without the extraordinary contribution of liberals — from the mightiest presidents to the most unheralded protesters and organizers — the United States would be a much, much worse place than it is today.

There would be absolutely no chance that a Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin could make a credible run for the highest offices in the land. Conservatives would never have allowed it.

Civil rights? Women's rights? Liberals went to the mat for them time and again against ugly, vicious and sometimes murderous opposition. They should be forever proud.

The liberals who didn't have a clue gave us Social Security and unemployment insurance, both of which were contained in the original Social Security Act. Most conservatives despised the very idea of this assistance to struggling Americans. Republicans hated Social Security, but most were afraid to give full throat to their opposition in public at the height of the Depression.

"In the procedural motions that preceded final passage," wrote historian Jean Edward Smith in his

biography, "FDR," "House Republicans voted almost unanimously against Social Security. But when the final up-or-down vote came on April 19 [1935], fewer than half were prepared to go on record against."

Liberals who didn't have a clue gave us Medicare and Medicaid. Quick, how many of you (or your loved ones) are benefiting mightily from these programs, even as we speak. The idea that Republicans are proud of Ronald Reagan, who saw Medicare as "the advance wave of socialism," while Democrats are ashamed of Lyndon Johnson, whose legislative genius made this wonderful, life-saving concept real, is insane.

When Johnson signed the Medicare bill into law in the presence of Harry Truman in 1965, he said: "No longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine."

Reagan, on the other hand, according to Johnson biographer Robert Dallek, "predicted that Medicare would compel Americans to spend their 'sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was like in America when men were free.' "

Scary.

Without the many great and noble deeds of liberals over the past six or seven decades, America would hardly be recognizable to today's young people. Liberals (including liberal Republicans, who have since been mostly drummed out of the party) ended legalized racial segregation and gender discrimination.

Humiliation imposed by custom and enforced by government had been the order of the day for blacks and women before men and women of good will and liberal persuasion stepped up their long (and not yet ended) campaign to change things. Liberals gave this country Head Start and legal services and the food stamp program. They fought for cleaner air (there was a time when you could barely see Los Angeles) and cleaner water (there were rivers in America that actually caught fire).

Liberals. Your food is safer because of them, and so are your children's clothing and toys. Your workplace is safer. Your ability (or that of your children or grandchildren) to go to college is manifestly easier.

It would take volumes to adequately cover the enhancements to the quality of American lives and the greatness of American society that have been wrought by people whose politics were unabashedly liberal. It is a track record that deserves to be celebrated, not ridiculed or scorned.

Self-hatred is a terrible thing. Just ask that arch-conservative Clarence Thomas.

Liberals need to get over it. ■

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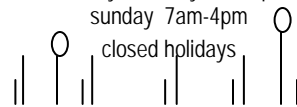
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