

## Is This Really Who We Are?

### When Old Fault Lines Begin Reappearing

*“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”*

—William Faulkner

I’m having trouble finding words to say something.

Not because the words don’t exist. More like they are resisting being used the way I want.

This Callais decision by the Supreme Court of the United States has stirred in me an uneasiness I thought had largely been put to rest decades ago. I feel history beginning to circle again, like in that maxim often attributed to Mark Twain: “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes.”

I worked in the Pentagon for six years. You don’t spend that much time inside a building without getting to know it. Construction on it began in 1941, and it was fully occupied by 1943. Size-wise, it was a small city – 17 miles of “streets” and “homes” for nearly 30,000 people.

One day, in some need, I found a restroom a bit “off the beaten path” that was different from others – smaller, more austere, dimmer. It had been one of the original “Colored Only” restrooms built into the architecture of the Pentagon during an era of segregation. It reminded me that just a few short decades separated me from a time when I would have bypassed this room to find one for “my kind.” Those days were past, but the reminder persisted.

And, in that moment, I was glad.

The room reminded me of something else too: segregation was not an accident of attitude. It was built. Designed. Authorized. Funded. Defended. The restroom I had stepped into was not the product of a random prejudice by some anonymous employee. It had been drawn into blueprints, approved by officials, and constructed by a government that, at the time, considered separation normal.

That realization matters because history has a way of becoming abstract once its visible markers disappear.

The Confederacy did not hide what it believed. Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, declared plainly in his “Cornerstone Speech” that the new government rested upon what he called the “great truth” that Black people were not equal to white people and

that subordination to the “superior race” was their “natural and normal condition.” Slavery was not merely economic to them. It was philosophical. Social. Political. Moral.

The Civil War ended the Confederacy, but ending a government did not end the ideas beneath it.

The 13th Amendment abolished slavery. The 14th attempted to establish equal citizenship and equal protection under law. The 15th went further still. It was not simply about voting in the abstract. It sought to secure political standing for newly freed enslaved persons whose emancipation could otherwise have remained incomplete in practice. Together, the Reconstruction Amendments represented something extraordinary: an attempt to redefine who fully belonged within the American political community.

In many ways, they attempted to constitutionalize belonging itself.

But resistance came almost immediately.

The Black Codes attempted to preserve control after emancipation. Jim Crow followed Reconstruction with a system of legalized separation that touched nearly every part of life: schools, transportation, neighborhoods, public facilities, voting, employment, and representation. “Separate but equal” became the language through which inequality defended itself while pretending neutrality.

And even after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of the 1960s, the struggle did not end. It changed form.

The overt gave way to the procedural.

District lines. Polling access. Voting qualifications. Administrative rules. “Race-neutral” arguments producing racially predictable outcomes. The language became cleaner even when the effects often remained familiar.

For a time, I thought we were finally moving beyond much of this. Not perfectly. Not completely. But meaningfully. The old signs had come down. The old laws had been struck down. The old language had become publicly shameful.

More than that, I believed we were slowly broadening our understanding of who fully belonged within the American story. Not simply who could live here, but who was accepted here. Who participated here. Who possessed an equal claim upon the promises and protections of citizenship without qualification or suspicion.

The progress was uneven and often incomplete, but it felt real. The widening of participation itself seemed to signal something healthy in us – not weakness, but

confidence. A growing willingness to accept that the strength of a democracy is found not in narrowing the circle, but in enlarging it.

Now I'm no longer sure.

Because something feels different again. Not only in policy disputes, but in tone. In permission. In the increasing willingness to speak aloud ideas and resentments that, for a while, had retreated from public respectability. What I once assumed had been overcome now feels less defeated than dormant.

And increasingly, the argument no longer seems to center only on policy. Beneath it lies an older tension: who fully belongs, who fully participates, and who gets treated as a problem to be managed rather than as an equal stakeholder in the American experiment.

That is what troubles me most.

Because once belonging becomes conditional, participation itself becomes fragile. And when participation becomes fragile, democracy begins narrowing from the inside — not always dramatically, not always loudly, but steadily, procedurally, and often under the language of fairness, order, or neutrality.

And as court decisions, redistricting battles, and political rhetoric begin circling around the same old fault lines — particularly in the same regions where these battles were once fought most fiercely — I find myself thinking back to that restroom in the Pentagon.

A reminder left standing from a past I believed was farther behind us than it really was.

And I want to ask the question:

Is this really who we are?

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