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Local Opinion: There's no room in America for 'the other'

Spiro Agnew, the vice president under Richard Nixon, used to rattle on about the “nattering nabobs of negativism.” Those four words were the original product of William Safire, a Nixon speechwriter at the time, later a syndicated columnist with the New York Times and always a timely poetic wordsmith. Who would ever want to be a “nabob” as this word became an insult of the early 1970s.

Funny thing is, the word “nabob” describes a Muslim official of the Mogul Empire. Americans are historic retailers of fancy sounding words, but not so much of the meanings of those words. Ronald Reagan used to speak of “pariah” nations. Who would want to be a member of an outcast untouchable group in southern India?

We tend to fall for these retooled words without really understanding their meanings. A better term for nabobs or pariah, as used by our leadership, is “the other.” As in, those who are not like us. Wordsmithing out of Washington these days is much coarser and lacks the poetry of the past, but it still has the same meaning. Those people are “them” and we don’t want to associate with “them.”

The racist N-word or the sexist B-word or Ronald Reagan’s dog whistle L-word are all meant to divide us against a feared segment of the Other. The term “democrat,” as in the philosophy and not the political party, seems to on the rise in our collection of “other” definitions.

All of this runs slap counter to the ideals of the American experiment where all are equal and endowed with inalienable rights. Those rights are not given by a hierarchy of elites, but are a simple birthright. Thus, it could be said that this language of the “other” is simply un-American at its core.

The mind naturally remembers negative stimulus above the positive. This is a product of our evolution as wanderers. It is much more difficult for us to cede power and protection, then it is to bow to the inevitability of a common purpose and shared resources. Social constructs, though, are a vital part of what makes us human. What

makes America great is not our economy or our kinetic might, which ultimately comes from the wondrous topsoil that provides us with food, but in our ability to take that resulting power and cede it to the people.

That means all of us.

The reality of the greatness of our founding “fathers” was that they were able to portray ideals that existed beyond their ability to honor them. Thus, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) originally excluded the many in favor of the one. What makes America great is our ability to strive toward those ideals and remember our history as a flawed people that tend to fail, not completely, at living up to those ideals. What makes America great is our ability to strive toward high ideals, legal equality and social equity.

Ultimately, the survival of the American experiment relies on the answer to the timely question, “Are we a people?” Do we have a set of shared ideals that are costly, but give us great benefit, or shall we separate into nabobs and pariahs inhabiting a shared space that we no longer wish to share?

“Out of many, one” is a sounding principal of whom we have wished to become. No great thing in American history was completed by an individual, but no great thing in American history ignored the individual and the right of that individual to an authentic life.