

Pelosi Cancels History By Removing Her Predecessors

On June 18, the portraits of four former Speakers of the House, all connected to the Confederate States of America and the Civil War, were [removed](#) from the walls of the Capitol. In the words of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, “There is no room in the hallowed halls of Congress or in any place of honor for memorializing men who embody the violent bigotry and grotesque racism of the Confederacy.” And so down went Robert Hunter of Virginia, James Orr of South Carolina, and Howell Cobb and Charles Crisp, both of Georgia.

Of course, this removal comes at a time when statues and monuments are being vandalized, toppled, and removed all over the country, leading Rep. Tom Massie (R-Ky.), to [exclaim](#), “Where does all this end? Renaming ‘Washington’ DC?”

As Douglas Bradburn, president of [George Washington’s Mount Vernon](#), [said to Just the News](#), “If we fail to honor George Washington, because we understand him only as a slave owner, we will lose the story of the United States, for it will have no beginning and very little direction.” Or as [Cicero](#), the ancient Roman, put it, “Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.”

Massie, Bradburn, and Cicero all make good points, and yet for the moment, we might confine ourselves just to those four Speakers who have been “canceled” – that is, sent down the Orwellian memory hole. All were interesting figures, and so as they go off to historical exile, even if we don’t like them, they can still offer us something to remember.

For instance, consider Orr, one of the disappeared. He was without doubt a Confederate, and yet as the *South Carolina Encyclopedia* details, after a lifetime as a Democrat and then

as a Secessionist, in 1870, "Orr joined the Republican Party in the hope of effecting reforms." That is, he switched from the Party of Jefferson Davis to the Party of Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, "As a delegate to the 1872 Republican national convention, he praised President Ulysses Grant's [anti] Ku Klux Klan policy in South Carolina."

Was Orr sincere in his change of heart? Or was he just an opportunistic "[scalawag](#)"? That's for historians to sort out, and yet President Grant appointed him to be ambassador to Russia, as the *Encyclopedia* tells us, "a gesture of reconciliation." Isn't that exactly what we should want? A coming together and a healing of national wounds? And so shouldn't we be learning about past positive precedents?

Then there's Charles Crisp, who in some ways is the most interesting of the quartet; he had the most extensive career after the Civil War, rising near to the pinnacle of American political life. As such, his career offers lessons to anyone wishing to learn about practical politics; indeed, his story illustrates a key lesson of life itself: Those who are at the bottom can sometimes rise to the top, and those who are on top can sometimes fall to the bottom. So with that in mind, who knows who will be canceling whom a century from now?

Born in 1845, Crisp served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War; in 1864, he was captured at Spotsylvania, spending the rest of the war as a POW. Released back to Georgia, he became a lawyer, a judge, and a state legislator. Then in 1882, he was elected to the U.S. House.

In 1890, the Democrats won a national majority in the House, and the following year, Crisp was elected Speaker of the 52nd Congress – putting him third in line for the presidency.

As one [historian](#) observed, Crisp was "a skillful debater and an expert parliamentarian," adding, "He was a man of marked judicial temperament – calm and deliberate with the ability to

maintain his own dignity and the dignity of his position.” Now, of course, such a description can be applied to just about every Speaker; the nature of the post is that it goes to a savvy insider who can gain the confidence of fellow insiders, each of them jockeying on behalf of themselves, their committees, and their districts. To put the job description another way, the Speaker is the ultimate deal-maker.

Indeed, the Democratic Party itself was a web of deals in those days; it consisted mostly of Southern white Protestants and Northern Catholics. The two factions had been on opposite sides of religious disputes tracing back to the Reformation; in America in particular, the split came over temperance, the Southerners being “dry” and the Northerners “wet.” In fact, the two blocs didn’t have much in common at all – except for a shared hostility to Northern Protestants, who were overwhelmingly Republican.

The Democratic Party consisted, then, of groups that felt victimized by Yankee power, both economic and cultural; the great tycoons and robber barons of the day, running the railroads, Wall Street, and the [“trusts,”](#) were almost all Republicans, as were the culture-producers of Boston and New York City. (And yes, the political map of the late 19th century was mostly the inverse of the red-blue map of today – that which was then-Republican being now Democratic, and that which was then-Democratic being now Republican.)

This was the political world of Charles Crisp. His region, the South, still bore the stain of rebellion and slavery, and yet white Southerners were nonetheless able to form a coalition with enough Northerners to make “Democracy,” as it was often called then, competitive in national elections; in fact, as soon as 1876 – barely more than a decade after the end of the Civil War – the Democrats won a clear popular-vote majority in the presidential election, although the GOP candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, prevailed in the electoral college.

So when Crisp took the Speaker's gavel in 1891 – the first Deep Southerner to do so since 1859 – it represented a huge victory, not only for the man himself, but also for his region. One could even say that Dixie proved better at politicking, inside the system, than at rebelling, outside the system.

Now, of course, the victory of white Southerners in those days came at the expense of black Southerners, who were almost all Lincoln Republicans. In fact, Southern Democrats had used their political skills, working with Northern Democrats, to discredit and dislodge the Republican policy of Reconstruction. And then, once the U.S. Army was out of the way, Southern whites – not to put too fine a point on it – used their martial skills to disenfranchise, and otherwise subjugate, blacks.

It's this racial history, of course, that dominates popular understanding today, and so Crisp and others are now in political limbo – or worse.

And yet there was another side to the 19th-century Southern Democrats: economic populism. In 1890, Congressman Crisp had supported the Sherman Anti-Trust Act – anti-trust, of course, being a progressive governmental remedy that it has gone in and out of fashion many times over the last 130 years – and in these days of Big Tech, it has been making a comeback.

Then, in 1894, when he was Speaker, Crisp help shepherd the [Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act](#) into law. That bill provided for a modest reduction in trade duties, and also, remarkably, it included a federal income tax. To be sure, the rate was low, just two percent on incomes over \$4,000 (adjusted for inflation, that would be almost \$100,000 today), and yet nonetheless, the enactment of any income tax was a watershed. (The Supreme Court threw out the tax as unconstitutional in 1895, and so an amendment to the Constitution, permitting an income tax, was a great Democratic cause for the next two

decades; it was finally put in place by a Southern-born Democrat, Woodrow Wilson.)

Of course, the popularity of the income tax has waxed and waned over the years, and rates have risen and fallen, and yet it has never been in jeopardy of being abolished; the exigencies of financing a modern government require such taxation. Indeed, it seems likely that rates will be increased in the next few years.

So we can see: Even if Crisp himself has been de-platformed, some of the economic ideas he championed seem poised for a comeback.

Crisp died in 1896; his admiring constituents elected his son to succeed him in the House. Indeed, there's a [Crisp County](#), Georgia, named in his honor.

Of course, the life of Charles Crisp is of no interest to those who simply want to erase history. For them, he and his kind are gone with the wind – and good riddance.

Yet Crisp's political career is a reminder that even the defeated can yet be the victorious, provided they possess the necessary resolve and resilience. Indeed, not that she would ever admit it, but Nancy Pelosi, Crisp's fellow Democrat, might feel a kinship to his ability to count votes and wrangle coalitions, especially on behalf of progressive economic policies.

So when America gets done with this spasm of iconoclasm, the thoughtful will realize that the secrets of effective politics have not been destroyed – and are still extant, in fact, in the biographies of the dead. So even if every statue or place honoring Crisp is pulled down or renamed, the ambitious, or merely curious, will still be able to learn about him; if they do, they'll understand something about coalitions and comebacks.

After all, as another Southern Democrat, Thomas Jefferson, [wrote](#) in 1817, “A morsel of genuine history [is] a thing so rare as to be always valuable.” Yes, Jefferson, too, is now on the PC chopping block, and yet he was wise enough to know that the judgments of history are never permanent.

Indeed, the actual *events* of history are, of course, permanent, and those “morsels,” when gleaned, are always valuable. As a result, Hunter, Orr, Cobb, and Crisp will always abide with us, even if we dare not speak their name.

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