

'Country On'—New Year's Eve, Nashville, 2023



by Roger L. Simon

(Following is a draft from the author's work-in-progress "American Refugees: What It Means Culturally, Politically and Spiritually to Migrate from Blue to Red States" to be published by Encounter Books)

One of the pleasures of moving to a red state from a blue state, perhaps *the* greatest personal pleasure, is that you can be yourself. But it takes a while for that fully to set in, rather like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, but in reverse.

That was true for me. Although I was publicly outspoken on the radio and in print literally since I relocated, and for years before as well, I frequently had my back up, as if I always

had to defend myself just for being honest about my opinions. It wasn't relaxing. Many others went in the opposite direction, remaining secretive about their beliefs long after their addresses had changed, some because they had personalities that disliked conflict and others for professional reasons.

In one extreme case, I heard about a very successful entertainment lawyer who, fed up with the stultifyingly monolithic life around him in California, decamped to a 100-acre estate in the upscale rural paradise of Leiper's Fork, not far from Franklin, Tennessee, but never told his connections back in Los Angeles that he had done that for fear it would destroy his business. This was a trick you could only pull off in the internet age, but for how long, one wondered.

Among the last Kübler-Ross stages in reverse to wither away, if it ever does completely, is the need to convince the folks back home in what might be called your state of origin—close friends and family that you may have displeased or even angered in your decision to leave—that you did the right thing, maybe even to follow you. These are the last people you can influence because it often threatens them the most. It's easier to sway a random person sitting next to you on a plane.

I realized I was beginning to pass through those stages finally as [New Year](#)'s 2023 approached. Nashville apparently was to be the epicenter of the celebration, supplanting New York, at least for television and probably beyond. CBS and FOX had placed their bets with Music City. More people would be in Times Square—although the 200,000 predicted in downtown Nashville wasn't too shabby—but the entertainment would be coming from red Tennessee's capital city.

A lineup including Jason Aldean, Sheryl Crow, Luke Bryan, Jimmie Allen, Elle King, and Darius Rucker among others was being touted. What did Hollywood have on offer? Not much anymore, with the film industry bought and paid for by

communist China and the Academy Awards devolved into a trivial “woke”-fest that few watched. Meanwhile, several of those country stars have recently made their feelings felt in support of our republic and its constitution, Aldean, in the company of his wife Brittany who has a heavy presence on social media, and Bryan in his latest hit, “Country On.” The song’s lyrics couldn’t be clearer: *“I say, ‘Hey, hey, USA/We ain’t seen our better days’/Hell naw, hey y’all/Country on.”*

Other verses praise the farmers, cowboys, firemen, truckers, and soldiers that compose the backbone of our nation. It’s hard to believe, since Bryan is a clever songwriter, the title “Country On” itself doesn’t have a double meaning.

The irony of course is that the city of Nashville is blue, but blue in a strange way because it is surrounded by red just miles outside and it is those people who would be the bulk of the throng New Year’s Eve. Being a bit old to brave the crowds, not that we were ever that fond of them, my wife Sheryl and I decided this New Year’s to have a small group of friends over for dinner to celebrate—adults who didn’t feel it necessary to stay up until the midnight ball dropped or the now famous musical note came down in Nashville.

That dinner proved to be the most relaxed and, in an odd way, insightful New Year’s I have ever experienced—the event, since my early teen years, having been something of an obligation to celebrate, as it is for many.

The group consisted of my by-now old friend, after four years in Nashville, Frank Gorgie—that rarest of birds, a university political science teacher who actually taught the subject and didn’t use it for indoctrination—and his wife Jean, also a prof of English lit; Gigi Levangie—screenwriter and author of “The Starter Wife” that was made into a series and other best-selling novels—and her husband Chris Elise— a photographer who specialized in capturing the athletic brilliance of the NBA until the objectively pro-fascist views of LeBron James et al

got the better of him.

Chris also happened to be a black guy with an Afro but whose politics since childhood tilted conservative. Further, he was French by birth and upbringing, but now an American citizen by choice.

All six of us were former Los Angelenos with no intention of going back but therefore with certain shared memories. Several of us were also once left-leaning to one degree or another. But what made the evening special had little to do with nostalgia for a world lost, but with freedom of speech. We could all say what we wanted about anything without thinking for a moment to edit ourselves. That meant criticizing other conservatives as well. Nobody's perfect, to say the least. We were never watching our backs in any way, something that had once been reflexive for most of us in different yet ultimately similar ways when you come down to it.

We jabbered on and on about just about everything under the sun, but largely focused on what others had done and what we could do to revive this once unique and magnificent nation of ours. Without realizing it, it was a cathartic experience. Call it the great shedding. You could breathe free, as Emma Lazarus once said of our country. It was still possible. All you had to do was do it. Gatherings like this were, in essence, political acts while being the most enjoyable yet seemingly innocuous of social events. They constituted the last stage of that reverse Kübler-Ross.

Also, as the evening wore on, both at home and, via the television screen, at the festivities that were going on downtown until the small hours of the morning, it became clearer, not that it hadn't been for some time, that conservatives were now the cool kids, and liberals and progressives the squares. The world had flipped. How long ago was difficult to determine, but not that recently. And freedom of speech was at the core of it.

Only the squarest of what we used to call squares could profess to be hip while suppressing the thoughts and beliefs of others. The obvious part is that it's cowardly and utterly conformist. More importantly, it leads—subtly and unsubtly—to a new form of totalitarianism that must be opposed vehemently at every turn. A nation of sheep was being built, far too many of whom were among the young.

Independent journalist and sometime—maybe we should say former—leftie himself Glenn Greenwald explained well the ominous results of this trend on his Substack:

“Far more alarming, far more alarming, is the support that this authoritarian censorship scheme is given by the vast majority of followers of the Democratic Party. And the reason for their support is as toxic as it is easily proven establishment left liberals are now among the millions of new Americans who simply no longer believe in free speech as a reflexive, foundational, defining American value. They do not want free speech to exist. They are against it.

“Unlike that consensus I celebrated back in 2006, modern-day liberals want the government to unite with corporate power to deny basic free speech rights to their political adversaries, and to know that you don't need to listen to me but to them.”

But for New Year's Eve 2023 in Nashville and its environs, the party played on in the streets and in private homes. Freedom was still in the air. But as Ben Franklin said, “can we keep it”?

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