

EDITORIAL

Some evolved on MLK honor

An obscure list has grown a little shorter this Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Congress legislated a federal holiday for the civil rights hero in 1983, and since then, the number of sitting senators who voted against that measure has dropped to just two: Republicans Charles Grassley of Iowa and Richard Shelby of Alabama (at the time, Shelby was a Democrat). Two senators dropped off the list over the last year: Orrin Hatch of Utah, who did not seek re-election, and John McCain of Arizona, who died in August. These days, it might seem shocking that anyone opposed the reverend, whose rhetoric and peaceful civil disobedience are examples of America at its best.

But in life, King was vilified as a rabble rouser. And even years after his murder, members of Congress stood and found reasons not to honor the famed leader. Their arguments were sometimes couched in concerns about King's "radical" connections and the economic effects of a new day off — that extra holiday would be oh so expensive — but beneath it lurked the racism that has wounded the nation since its founding.

Public perception has changed about King. That evolution is a profoundly American act, too.

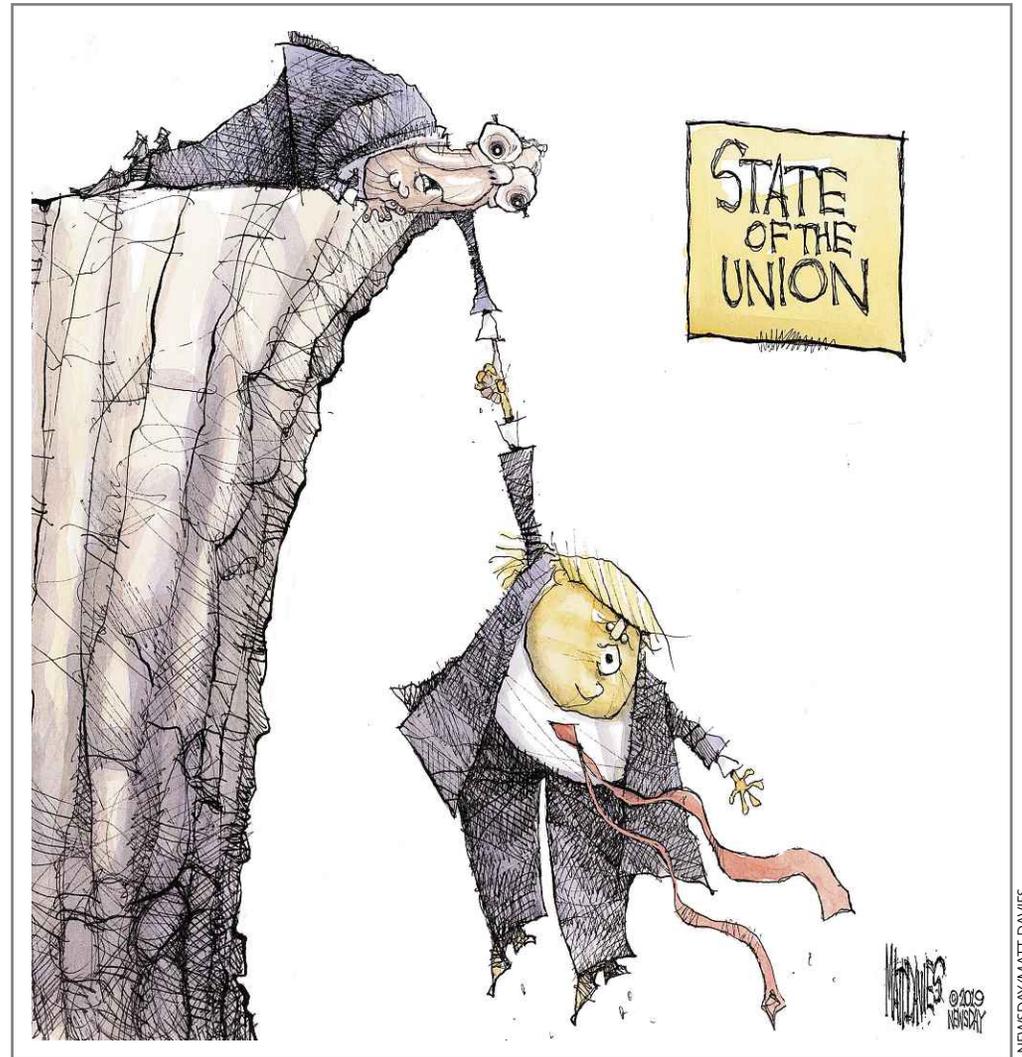
Some senators who voted against the holiday evolved personally, for one reason or another. Hatch eventually called it "one of the worst decisions" he made as a senator. McCain came to see his vote as a mistake, too, and eulogized King in Memphis on the 40th anniversary of his death. In 2004, Grassley co-sponsored legislation awarding a posthumous medal to MLK.

Surely King had imperfections like any mortal, but his best example is what we aspire to today.

People can change. Countries can, too. The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice, as King liked to say. The new Congress has some admirable diversity. Overt racism in that body is less tolerated: See South Carolina Republican Sen. Tim Scott blasting the repugnant comments of Iowa Rep. Steve King, who advocates for white supremacy. There is hope, but also much work to be done. The evolution must continue.

— *The editorial board*

MATT DAVIES



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COLUMN

Legal pot and sports wagering are bad bets



William F. B. O'Reilly

There are things we know without thinking. They live in a place deeper than our minds.

Some involve right and wrong. Others warn us of harm. A mother will rush to remove an unknown agent from the mouth of a newborn faster than any thought can materialize. No one needs to be taught that it's wicked to kick a puppy. We just know.

We do our best to rationalize away these certitudes when we

find them inconvenient. Yet that feeling in our gut remains. Whatever we choose to call it — conscience, survival instinct, higher power — it's there to guide us, and we are wise not to ignore it.

Two bills set for passage this year in Albany have to trigger unease of this nature in the souls of state legislators, whether or not they care to admit it. They must know they're playing with fire in legalizing the sale and recreational use of marijuana in New York, and allowing professional sports betting.

Nearly all in the State Legislature, I would bet, will vote yes against their better instincts.

Their hunger for new tax revenue, atop a progressive zeitgeist preaching down as up and up as down, will override whatever hesitant feelings they may have.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo insisted that pot was "a gateway drug" just over a year ago. Now, he's proselytizing legalization.

Yep, he knows. Senate Republicans relegated to the minority by last year's elections now call for marijuana revenue to be used for tax cuts after years of blocking legalization.

Clearly, they know, too. Opponents of marijuana and sports betting can present empirical data showing the tragic ef-

fects of gambling and drug addiction on individuals and families, the spike in highway deaths in states that have legalized marijuana, the profound mental health risks at play when teens smoke pot, and on and on. None of it will matter because most of our legislators already know that legalizing marijuana is wrong, yet they're choosing to do it anyway. Same goes for sports betting. Why else would they have kept both illegal for so long?

What New Yorkers hear now from their so-called leaders are elaborate rationalizations, superficial arguments contrived to quiet that voice inside. We will once again normalize some-

thing we instinctively knew to resist. As a society, we will have defined deviancy down, as the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan rightly put it.

Sports betting and legal marijuana use will not make the sky fall. But ignoring the voice of common sense screaming inside us eventually will. All we can ask of our state legislators at this point is that they listen to their inner voices when these bills come to the floor.

No new law is inevitable; we don't have to go this way.

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