Editor: Cynthia S. Paris
(804) 649-6801
oped@timesdispatch.com

OP/ED

CIVIL RIGHTS

A citadel of evil, renamed for a heroine

BY LARISSA SMITH FERGESON

In a ceremony Thursday, the Ninth Street Office Building that is home to the Virginia office of the attorney general will be formally renamed in honor of Barbara Johns, who led the 1951 student walkout protesting overcrowded and inadequate conditions at Prince Edward County's all-black Moton High School. Also this week, the Virginia House of Delegates is poised to pass a Senate resolution declaring April 23, the anniversary of the Moton strike, as Barbara Johns Day across the commonwealth beginning next year.

The formative role Barbara Johns played not only in Virginia history but in the national civil rights movement has begun at last to receive deserved recognition, both in school textbooks and public understanding. The statue of Johns on the Capitol grounds, and now the renaming of the former Hotel Richmond building and the declaration of Barbara Johns Day are all important milestones of this progress.

As a historian of Virginia and the civil rights era, I can't help but marvel at this moment, and how much of the modern history of Virginia it touches. Occasionally as historians we encounter particular places which themselves illuminate history, their proximity to important events serving to remind and reveal to us the great societal transformations they have witnessed.

This is one such building and one such occasion. After Johns led the student protest at Moton, many of the students became plaintiffs in a court case that became part of the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education, which declared segregation in public education unconstitutional. Of the five cases that constituted the Brown decision, the Prince Edward case was the only one initiated by students, and Moton students and their parents accounted for 75 percent of the plaintiffs in Brown.

In 1956, the Virginia General Assembly passed laws to thwart the Brown decision — what we now refer to as Massive Resistance. In 1958, Gov. J. Lindsay Almond, who had defended the constitutionality of segregation before the Supreme Court as Virginia's attorney general during Brown, shut down schools in Norfolk, Charlottesville and Warren County to stop integration. The courts declared the governor's action unconstitutional. Undeterred, in 1959, Prince Edward County officials defied a court order to integrate and defunded the public schools. Schools remained closed for five years, longer than any other locality in the nation, until another Supreme Court decision reopened them in 1964.

Meanwhile, the legal and political force behind Massive Resistance derived from U.S. Sen. Harry F. Byrd's Democratic Party organization. That political machine's unofficial headquarters was none other than the Hotel Richmond.

In recent history, this same building has housed the office of the Virginia attorney general — an office that once embodied the use of state power as an instrument to defend inequality in the law and deny citizens their civil rights. Today, the Virginia attorney general's office is of course involved in contentious contemporary issues. But no one would dispute that the role it played during the 1950s and 1960s to slow the progress of civil rights would be unimaginable today. Now, the attorneys and other professionals there will come to work each day in a building named for a 16-year-old girl whose right to an equal education their predecessors fought to deny.

In short, the story of the building at 202 North Ninth Street is in many ways the story of Virginia. And it serves to remind us that, for the messiness of democracy, Virginia has over long sweeps of time seen real progress.

Above all, I hope the occasion will serve to further educate the public about the story of Johns and her fellow students. Though Johns herself passed away in 1991, some of her classmates are still alive and remember the real fear and determination they felt during the strike and the subsequent school closings.

They certainly knew what it meant to live in tumultuous times, when our democratic experiment felt divided and potentially fragile.

Yet they made patient use of the tools of democracy — peaceful protest and legal action — that paved the way for meaningful change. In so doing, they helped ensure a better version of American democracy was passed down to the next generation.

Larissa Smith Fergeson is a professor of history at Longwood University, and the university liaison to the Moton Museum.

SHARON WOHLMUTH

Barbara Johns Powell (shown here in May 1979) led the 1951 student walkout at Robert R. Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Va.

ECONOMIC AGENDA

White House already cooking the books

WASHINGTON

Almost exactly a year ago, I suggested a rule of thumb for evaluating candidates' economic agendas: The more growth a politician promises, the worse his or her economic plan probably is. Why? Because it suggests they had to make extra-rosy assumptions to get their math to work.

Catherine **Rampell**

Supercharged growth implies higher tax revenue, as well as lower spending on means-tested programs such as Medicaid and unemployment insurance. As a result, astronomical economic growth is often used to paper over the astronomically large deficits that would result under more realistic assumptions.

As President Trump assembles his fiscal agenda, that rule of thumb is coming in handy once again.

Astonishingly, the White House still hasn't released details for any of the major economic initiatives Trump promised during the campaign (a "terrific" Obamacare replacement, a top-to-bottom tax overhaul, massive infrastructure investment). But thanks to recent leaks about the administration's economic book-cooking, we at least know that whatever Trump ultimately proposes will be very, very expensive.

After the election, the Trump transition team began the long, arduous process of putting together the presidential budget. As is always the case, it worked with the (nonpolitical) career staffers at the Council of Economic Advisers.

Normally this process starts by asking the CEA staff to estimate baseline economic growth under current policies. These professionals then build on this baseline to forecast how the president's proposals will affect the overall economy, as well as budget deficits.

The results are often more optimistic than what independent forecasters predict — the White House is factoring in new policies it thinks are pro-growth, after all — but not wildly so. The numbers still need to be credible.

Like I said, that's how things normally work. Not this time around.

As The Wall Street Journal first reported (and as I've independently confirmed through my own sources), the Trump transition team instead ordered CEA staffers to predict sustained economic growth of 3 to 3.5 percent. The staffers were then directed to backfill all the other numbers in their models to produce these growth rates.

Set aside for a moment the sheer intellectual dishonesty of this approach. Let me first offer context for how nutty such a forecast would be.

Inflation-adjusted economic growth over the past decade has been less than 2 percent. And independent projections for the coming decade are equally lackluster, thanks in part to population aging. The Federal Reserve, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office and private forecasters predict about 1.8 to 1.9 percent annual growth.

In other words, based on nothing but expediency, the Trump team prophesies growth that's more than a full percentage point higher than almost anyone else expects. Even conservative economists who believe that a tax-cutting, deregulatory agenda will unleash pent-up growth must find Trump's forecasts-by-fiat hard to swallow.

On an American Economic Association panel last month, Columbia Business School dean Glenn Hubbard — who chaired George W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers and advised the presidential campaigns of Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush — discussed the consequences of Trump's agenda. He estimated that "reasonable or upper-bound estimates" for sustained economic growth would be about 2.75 percent. And to be clear, many economists find even that prediction Pollyannaish.

During the campaign, Trump made no secret of his disdain for experts, economic or otherwise. He has since doubled down on this view by demoting the CEA chair from his Cabinet. Not that the demotion really matters at this point; a month into his presidency, Trump hasn't named a single political appointee to the council.

Given this recent Argentine-style data manipulation decree, perhaps no one respectable is willing to take the job.

Trump and his team have likewise openly disparaged federal statistics. He has called the unemployment rate "phony" and "a total fiction." The administration is also reportedly trying to manipulate the official trade statistics.

In fairness, Trump is not the first politician to engage in voodoo economics or monkey with growth forecasts.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, lots of Republican candidates and at least one Democratic candidate inflated their gross domestic product forecasts to make themselves appear less fiscally irresponsible. "Rosy Scenario" was also known to haunt the Reagan White House.

Of course, there are also risks to over-promising on growth — or on jobs, deficits, health care affordability, trade or any other front on which Trump has pledged to repeal the laws of economics. That is, voters might remember your promises and punish you when you don't deliver. Maybe Team Trump is counting on being able to backfill voter memories, too.

Contact Catherine Rampell at crampell@washpost.com; follow her on Twitter: @crampell.

INNOVATION

Don't strangle Airbnb. Cut its competitors some slack.

Government is frequently a one-way ratchet whose grip grows ever tighter, never looser. The evidence for that premise, already abundant, continues to mount. Take the way Virginia's General Assembly has responded to Airbnb.

A. Barton **Hinkle**
bhinkle@TimesDispatch.com

A bill to regulate short-term rentals, which mostly means Airbnb, has moved swiftly through the legislature. The measure would let localities create short-term rental registries and require "operators" — i.e., homeowners — to register not once, but every year. They also would have to get an ABC license if they want to serve alcohol to their guests.

The bill's patron, Tommy Norment, represents a tourism-heavy region and has a financial stake in two hotels. He also is co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and threatened opponents of the Airbnb bill with an even more Draconian proposal if it didn't pass: a budget amendment creating a state registry and imposing a $500 fine for every day an unregistered property was rented out. (Norment also was instrumental in derailing other legislation in last year's Assembly that took a much more favorable stance toward sharing-economy rentals.) Another measure this year, sponsored by state Sen. Bill Stanley, would have imposed a $10,000 fine on anyone who committed a short-term rental in a locality that forbids them.

The lodging industry supports tighter controls on Airbnb, for the obvious reason. As Del. Chris Peace put it last year, "They want the government to protect their market share."

Not that the hotel industry would ever put it so baldly. Instead, supporters of Norment's bill make a different argument. Last year Eric Terry, president of the Virginia Restaurant, Lodging & Travel Association, told The Washington Post: "We welcome Airbnb, but we just think they should be subject to the same requirements that a bed-and-breakfast or a hotel has to go through." A few days ago he told The Times-Dispatch, "It really is about a level playing field."

That invites two questions. First: A "level playing field" sounds nice, but is it necessary? We don't require a level playing field between, say, TruGreen, which has almost $1 billion in annual revenue, and the guy who mows your lawn for 50 bucks and a couple of beers. Or between Major League Baseball and the local little league, even though both take your money (and as some parents will attest, lots of it). Yet the hotel industry seems to be arguing that if legitimate grounds exist for a level playing field between certain competitors in one market, then nothing else will do but a level playing field among all competitors in every market. Hardly a self-evident truth.

One proposal in the Assembly this year, favored by Airbnb, would have allowed short-term rentals of up to 21 days a year without regulation. That would seem to make more sense than insisting that someone who rents out a room for a special event now and then ought to be treated as the same as the $34 billion Marriott corporation.

Granted, a broad variety of property owners fills the spectrum between those two poles. Bed-and-breakfast owners in particular have been nursing a resentment over the asymmetric treatment they receive. As one of them told The Times-Dispatch, "Legal B&Bs have to comply with federal, state and local laws. . . . An Airbnb facility, right now, has to comply with nothing."

(N.b., A "facility" means a person's home.)

This brings up the second question, and gets to the ratchet effect: If there is an unjustified asymmetry between B&Bs and Airbnb rentals, why impose onerous regulations on the latter? Why not, instead, relax regulations on the former?

According to a story last year in The Washington Post, one B&B owner "spent nearly six months getting permits from city hall, securing an alcohol license for wine and cheese nights, and even submitting floor plans to figure out the proper location for smoke detectors." Six months — and an alcohol license? Seriously, now.

If her experience is anything like typical, then the B&B industry in Virginia needs help getting the government's boot off its neck. And this is all the more true because the B&B industry is particularly subject to market self-correction, thanks to the rise of consumer-review portals like Yelp. If you had a bad experience at a B&B a couple of decades ago, you might be able to warn a few friends. Today you can warn the entire planet.

Then again, the B&B industry (or at least parts of it) might like the heavy regulation — for the same reason taxi companies like medallion regimes: Making it hard for people to enter the market means fewer competitors and more business for the incumbents.

For everyone else, it might be worth asking: Why does the knee-jerk response to economic innovations always seem to involve tying them down with rules applied to older business models — instead of cutting the latter some slack?

Bhinkle@timesdispatch.com
(804) 649-6627
Twitter: @ABartonHinkle