

My Thoughts on the Tennessee Three by John Ashworth

Written to a high school History teacher...

I do not know if my thoughts will add value to your instruction, but I really appreciate the opportunity to express them with someone inside the classroom, thank you so much for the opportunity.

My thoughts about the TN expulsion: Given the history of race relations in this country it is easy to see the obvious racist aspects of the legislature's actions. I could be wrong and really hope that I am, but I think it is too easy for younger people of color especially at the high school level to see and call out the racist and sexist aspects of Tennessee's action and stop there.

My deep concern is they will simply stop there without understanding the much larger threat to the idea of justice in an unrealized true democracy. Many authors and speakers have written and commented that America is an idea. I agree as we are still struggling to make the eloquent words and principles of the Declaration of Independence (a) true and (b) apply to all.

The actions of the TN legislature in expelling those elected representatives is a continuation of a deliberate process to disenfranchise voters across the state of Tennessee. Historically, gerrymandering has been the process used to disenfranchise selected voters. Whether intended or not the face of gerrymandering is seen as actions taken by powerful, wealthy, connected white males. That alone makes it hard to see the much bigger threat for young people.

Data suggests that Tennessee at the state level is one of the most gerrymandered states in the country. It is that gerrymandering that allowed the majority party, republicans in this case, to be confident that they could expel elected representatives without consequence. Their confidence in avoiding any consequence of their action is demonstrated by their bypassing any ethical procedural processes and going directly to expulsion. That level of confidence parallels the confidence of lynch mobs, confident there would be no repercussions for their extra-judicial actions.

I think it is the end results and consequences of gerrymandering that have caused so many younger eligible voters to lose hope in the vote. Gerrymandered politicians only address the issues of their constituents that they, the politicians, pre-selected to vote for them. The other constituents are disregarded and left to fend for themselves on really important issues. Far too many younger people have lost hope in the democratic process that their ancestors fought so hard and sacrificed so much for. They see themselves as constituents without representation because of the unabated disenfranchisement of their votes.

We of the older generation may dispute their cries, “my vote doesn’t count, it will make no difference, it doesn’t matter”. While this is not true, their lived reality is that it is very true that their vote and voice do not count.

Where does all of this leave us in the aftermath of Tennessee’s expulsions? From every corner of the country there are the cries of proud support for the actions of the Tennessee Three and a very special sense of pride in the two Justin’s. Nevertheless, those actions of the Tennessee Legislature expelling them have just as many expressing pride and support for that action and it is serving to empower other republican controlled state legislatures and governing bodies to take similar actions.

To be sure we live in a political society based on the principle of a representative form of government and change is brought through that process, culminating with the right to petition for the redress of grievances when the representation does not work. If that process fails, then the alternatives eventually lead to violent confrontation.

Studies reveals that most non-voting Americans lean much closer to the ideals and values expressed in the nation’s founding documents. The new uphill battle then is to convince younger people why they must become engaged in the political process or prepare to see more expulsion-like behavior which will eventually lead to violent confrontations and a real risk of losing any sense of democracy in this country.

My study of recent American history leads me to conclude that each time this country has made a major shift toward the Beloved Country, it has been the force and the voice of young people. I pray this time will be no different.