

Look the same, be the same

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—High school is one of those things that hang around adults like a few embarrassing old pounds that you can never escape.

It came out last week that Governor Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee, had led a group of male classmates in forcibly cutting the hair of a younger student in 1965 when Romney, 18, was a boarding senior at the exclusive Cranbrook School near Detroit.

Five of the participants -- four named and quoted on the record -- described an attack on John Lauber, a newly enrolled junior, who showed up with longish, bleached blond hair that fell over one eye. Lauber's appearance offended Romney who, the others agreed, led the assault and worked the scissors. Five, including a wrestling champion, held Lauber down while he struggled and cried for help. Six against one.

It seems from the participants' statements that Romney was personally offended by Lauber choosing to look different. One remembered Romney saying before the attack: "He [Lauber] can't look like that. That's wrong. Just look at him."

Romney said in response to this Washington Post story: "I don't remember that incident, and I'll tell you I certainly don't believe that I...thought the fellow was homosexual."

Whether Lauber was targeted for being different than Romney in his sexual orientation, or acting different, or being considered different is not clear from the story. The motive for the attack seems to have been Lauber's non-conforming appearance. The Post also reported that Romney would shout "Atta girl!" at a then-closeted gay classmate, Gary Hummel, when he tried to speak in English class.

Having done more than my share of stupid and hurtful things in high school, I find it inconceivable that Romney does not remember "that incident" even though almost 50 years have passed. The other students described it as "searing," "vicious" and unforgettable. Those five have carried remorse into adulthood.

Cranbrook did not reprimand the six attackers. Lauber was expelled later that year after a fellow student turned him in for smoking. Cranbrook, it appears, did not want Lauber, but it did want Romney.

Lauber, who died in 2004, would later come out to close friends and family. He continued to bleach his hair and never forgot his Cranbrook haircut, which he later described to one of the attackers: “It was horrible.”

Romney, the leader of the pack, is the only one who doesn’t remember what the pack did.

It’s certainly possible that Romney has an unimaginably bad memory. If this is true, I’m not sure he would make a very good POTUS.

I think it’s much more likely that Romney and his campaign advisers figured that a “failure to recollect” was a better tactic for throwing a wet blanket over this episode than saying: “I am ashamed of what I did and can never make it up to John Lauber. I have tried to be a better person than I was then.”

A statement like that would have made Mitt Romney a bigger person without forcing him to endorse gay rights, which he opposes.

Many politicians are subject to an opportune memory failure, because it’s less risky than outright denial of reality. A selective bad memory is handy to have around and nothing to sneeze at.

Think how much better off Bill Clinton would have been had he said: “Golly ned, folks, I jes don’t recall havin’ had sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky.” Instead, Clinton looked us in the eye and promised: “I did *not* have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky.”

It wasn’t hard to prove that Clinton had something going on with Lewinsky even though he didn’t think it was sex. But it would have been harder to prove that he couldn’t remember what had taken place.

No one, of course, would have believed this 18-minute gap in Clinton’s legendary memory, but that’s a different kettle of dead fish. Romney is clearly smarter than Clinton in handling things that stink.

President Obama took a different tack in recalling bad high-school behavior. He admitted in his 1995 autobiography, Dreams From My Father, and to a 2006 meeting of the American Society of Magazine Editors that he had inhaled marijuana smoke and tried cocaine. He boxed it up and put it in a corner. He said it was stupid and dangerous. It reflected unsettled teenage impulses and low self-esteem. He said it was a mistake that he regretted.

Admission, denial, failure to recall—those are the three choices.

Romney continues to feel more comfortable around people who look like the wholesome cast of a 1969 Lawrence Welk show.

From all accounts, Romney has been generous with his fellow Mormons and persons with whom he worked. He seems to have an easy time being good around people who are like him in attitudes, values and appearance. But he remains awkward around those who aren’t.

As a Yankee who's lived the last 30 years in Virginia, I found it painful to watch Romney trying to "you-all" himself into rural, white Mississippi during the Republican primary. He swallowed grits like he thought they were buttered gravel.

Perhaps Romney's need to dress up in the appearance of conformity comes from the Mormon experience—a religion that was persecuted because of its doctrinal differences with established Protestant denominations. Perhaps, because his faith remains outside this mainstream, he compensates by insisting on not looking different. Perhaps, he was securing his place inside Cranbrook by marking Lauber as irreversibly outside.

The Romney-Lauber story broke when Obama was stating publicly for the first time that he endorsed the right of marriage under the law for individuals of the same gender.

Romney opposes legalization, but did not want to be drawn into a dispute over gay-related issues. I don't think his heart's in that fight, and I don't think he has the stomach for it.

Maybe that's John Lauber's legacy to Mitt Romney.

Recent American history sides with Obama. For the last 50 years, the country has mainly followed the idea that any right or status under the law that the political system extends to some will be -- and should be -- extended to all, sooner or later.

I'm more than willing to cut Romney slack for doing stupid things as a teenager. Most teenagers do stupid things, and most adults recall doing them.

Unfortunately, stupid things don't become harmless pranks with the passage of time. Apologies don't remove old wrongs, or right them. But they can soften them a bit and put them in a different place. How they're handled become benchmarks by which to judge any distance we have come.

Romney, I'm sure, would not do something like this at 65, whether or not he was a political candidate. He's older, kinder, more mature, more experienced, more broad-minded.

What troubles me about this long-ago incident is Romney hiding in "I don't remember."

That didn't happen in 1965; that happened last week.

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