

INSIGHT

Scott Nunn, Opinion editor
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Trump's appeal to our inner demons



Michael Gerson

The ouster of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen — the implementer of some of the most unjust immigration policies since the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II — is another proof of Donald Trump's ratchet-wrench theory of loyalty. It goes only in his direction.

In the end, the burnt offering of a staffer's character is not enough. After trying to enforce and anticipate Trump's cruel or irrational whims, he or she is generally packed off without ceremony, with diminished professional respect and, presumably, with diminished self-respect. Trump has taken what should be the honor of a lifetime — serving the country at the highest levels of the executive branch — and turned it into a reputational black hole.

A few — think former Defense Secretary James Mattis and former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley — have managed to serve without self-immolation. But this is only because they skillfully established some distance between their views and the president's. Did anyone doubt that Mattis respected NATO, or that Haley was concerned about human rights?

Nielsen, however, took another route. After a career generally characterized by competence, Nielsen chose to reflect Trump's priorities. Maybe she reasoned to herself that she was implementing the president's agenda more humanely than others would have done. Aristotle referred to human beings as rational animals. They are, at least, rationalizing animals.

But the separation of crying migrant children from their parents as a deterrent, and the storing of children in prison-like conditions, will be some of the most enduring political images of the Trump era. It says something about Nielsen that she took part in such practices. It says something about Trump that such actions were apparently too moderate and restrained for his taste.

The status of immigration as Trump's defining issue is still confusing. He returns to this topic in nearly every time of political stress. Yet it is difficult to imagine that his convictions are deeply rooted. Trump has a long history of hiring illegal immigrants, whom he clearly did not regard as potential terrorists and rapists. And it wasn't too long ago that Trump criticized Mitt Romney for intemperance on the topic as the Republican presidential nominee. "He had a crazy policy of self-deportation, which was maniacal," Trump said following the 2012 presidential election. "It sounded as bad as it was, and he lost all of the Latino vote. He lost the Asian vote. He lost everybody who is inspired to come into this country."

But now Trump seems to find a message of exclusion positively invigorating. In his stump speech, he does not raise legitimate issues related to immigration. Instead, he easily outpaces Romney in the maniacal and crazy department. At the White House, he humiliates staffers who don't share his enthusiasm and fires people who are not creative enough in their severity. Even a hint of reluctance is taken as betrayal.

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DARE to Dream

General contractor Dave Nathans poses in the sanctuary of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church on North Fourth Street prior to its restoration. Trying to help save the historic church building was one of DARE's first forays into the North Fourth Street area. [STARNEWS FILE]



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church opened its doors in 1888. Over the years, the structure fell into disrepair. Today it is the Brooklyn Arts Center and serves as a symbol of the revitalization of the North Fourth Street and Brooklyn areas. [STARNEWS FILE]

As DARE became involved with North Fourth, it immediately set its sights on a large junkyard that covered nearly an entire city block at Third and Hanover streets, across from the current Wilson Center. There was no way the North Fourth district would have a bright future with a junkyard as its gateway.



These diners at Elijah's have DARE and other downtown leaders to thank for being able to have a mixed drink and enjoy a meal on a deck adjacent to the river. It wasn't that long ago that state laws prohibited both of those activities. [STARNEWS FILE]

Downtown's revival moves north ... and to the legislature and ballot box

In the late 1970s, DARE (Downtown Area Revitalization Effort) led efforts to save a dying downtown Wilmington. The unprecedented public-private partnership transformed blocks of empty, rundown buildings into the vibrant downtown we enjoy today. Gene Merritt, a DARE founder, is looking back at the group's work.

By Gene Merritt
 For StarNews Media

(Third in an occasional series)

With revitalization efforts along the riverfront and central business district solidly in place, DARE stepped out beyond Wilmington's traditional downtown.

At the same time, the upstart organization challenged two laws that had little practical benefit but were hindering downtown — especially the riverfront — from meeting its full potential. If the laws had remained in place, Wilmington would not have the thriving riverfront we enjoy today.

Northern exposure

Long before downtown Wilmington's decline began in the early 1970s, the nearby Brooklyn neighborhood had fallen on hard times. The area, just to the northeast of downtown and across the railroad cut, thrived from the mid-19th century until after World War II.

With its large African-American population mixed with Germans, Russian Jews and Chinese, Brooklyn was Wilmington's most ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood. With the lower end of North Fourth Street as its commercial center, Brooklyn was primarily a residential and shopping district for African-Americans.

In the post-World War II years, businesses gradually began to close and the neighborhood declined. The North Fourth district, however, still had "good bones" — existing streets, water/sewer, sidewalks, streetlights and other infrastructure.

Although the city was on board with revitalization and a new vision for downtown's central business district, the North Fourth Street corridor received little attention.

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DARE

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Hoping to revitalize the historic neighborhood, longtime Northside resident and community activist Harry Forde and I founded the North Fourth Street Partnership. We eventually asked DARE to help with our efforts. (Though the North Fourth Street Partnership struggled and eventually had to disband, the group's efforts put the overlooked neighborhood back on the map and planted seeds that would ultimately prove fruitful.)

As DARE became involved with North Fourth, it immediately set its sights on a large junkyard that covered nearly an entire city block at Third and Hanover streets, across from the current Wilson Center. There was no way the North Fourth district would have a bright future with a junkyard as its gateway.

A major goal for the North Fourth Street Partnership was to bring a grocery store to the underserved neighborhood. DARE optioned the junkyard property and worked diligently to land a grocery store for the site, though that effort failed.

Eventually, developers Dave Nathans and Dave Sptirino got involved and transformed the old junkyard into a major mixed-use project called Promenade. The 150 residential condominiums and five-story office building kicked off the redevelopment of the North Fourth business district.

The second-biggest accomplishment for North Fourth also would involve Nathans.

Among the architectural and historic gems in the neighborhood was the old St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, at Fourth and Campbell streets. Since 1888, the building had "served as a spiritual, cultural, and community center for Brooklyn."

In 1944, St. Andrew's merged with Covenant Presbyterian and moved to the more central location of 15th and Market streets. Over the years, several other churches made their homes in the large, impressive structure, though its upkeep proved both challenging and costly. In 1997, with the building continuing to deteriorate, Holy Trinity Church — the last religious congregation to occupy the building — sold it to Charlotte businessman W. Douglas Foster, who pledged to stabilize the



The sanctuary of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church before restoration. The historic church is now the Brooklyn Arts Center. [STARNEWS FILE PHOTOS]



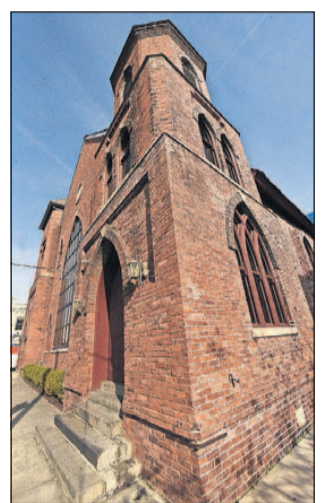
The Brooklyn Arts Center is seen earlier this year. The building is over 130 years old. [STARNEWS FILE]



Renovations to the exterior masonry of St. Andrew's Church in 2006. Trying to help save the historic structure was one of the first times DARE expanded its work outside the traditional downtown area. [STARNEWS FILE]



A successful referendum in 1979 to allow so-called liquor by the drink helped make downtown restaurants a more popular destination and economically viable. This poster was used extensively by the mixed beverage supporters. [COURTESY OF GENE MERITT]



DARE got involved in the early efforts to save the St. Andrew's Church building. The group's biggest success in the North Fourth Street area was the removal of a nearby junkyard that covered nearly an entire city block. An office building and apartments replaced the junkyard, marking a major step in the revitalization of the historic neighborhood. [STARNEWS FILE]

church's walls and roof.

Nathans ultimately became the building's owner, undertaking major renovation work and transforming it into the popular Brooklyn Arts Center. (Nathans recently sold BAC to a party that is continuing that vision for this spectacular space.)

Though not all of the early North Fourth projects were successful, the energy and passion behind them helped re-establish the historic area's stature as a vital part of downtown, sparking the revitalization and entrepreneurial mentality that continues today in the evolving neighborhood, now called The Brooklyn Arts District.

Downtown's class act

Although Cape Fear Community College was sometimes seen as an obstacle to revitalization, DARE's support for keeping the school downtown has paid off, as CFCC has become an important player. The campus has steadily emerged in the blighted area that was left mostly empty after the 1960 departure of

the Atlantic Coast Line railroad headquarters and demolition of most of its buildings.

One of the biggest impacts of CFCC is that it ended up serving as a sort of bridge to the rapidly growing northern end of downtown, home to PPD's headquarters, Port City Marina, numerous apartment buildings, hotels and the convention center. The Riverwalk now runs all the way to the Isabel Holmes Bridge and the city's North Waterfront Park is slated to open in 2020.

Although not contributing directly to the tax base, the quality of CFCC's development has enhanced the area and benefited the private development occurring in the vicinity of the school. CFCC's Wilson Center is now the region's premier performing arts venue.

Waterfront dining

In 1994, the South Water Street Development Team was formed by Thomas Wright III, Harper Peterson, Mike Hargett (City of Wilmington), Dave Weaver



An event at the Brooklyn Arts Center, formerly the old St. Andrew's church. [STARNEWS FILE]

(New Hanover County) and myself. The group's mission was to lobby for changes that would support downtown's waterfront redevelopment, notably the ongoing extension of the Riverwalk.

Among our chief concerns were the restrictive state regulations that affected riverfront development in downtown Wilmington. At that time, there could be no construction in an Area of Environmental Concern. The AEC in downtown Wilmington extended 70 feet from Water Street's western easement to the mean high-water mark in the river.

The city had made progress in building some parts of the Riverwalk. However, we were unable to access restaurants from the riverfront, including the Pilot House, Elijah's, and later, The George. The consumption of food and beverage over "public trust waters" was not permitted. We knew dining near the water would be a key part of drawing people downtown. The regulations hurt the economic viability for the restaurants, and hurt downtown tourism in general.

We began lobbying for changes in the CAMA (Coastal Area Management Act) rules, and the issue eventually came to a head during the preservation and re-development of the J.W. Brooks Building on South Water Street.

Rehabbing the Brooks Building was a project Gene Strader and I had undertaken. We agreed to pay for the extension of the Riverwalk on the water side of the building

(as it is today), a project the city was eager to support. We soon found out, however, that CAMA rules would not allow us to build anything in the AEC. The rule effectively blocked the Riverwalk from being contiguous in that area of the waterfront.

With the help of city officials Mike Hargett and Tom Pollard, Rep. Thomas Wright introduced legislation in the General Assembly to allow some flexibility in the rules. In its 1997 session, the legislature passed House Bill 1059, which amended the Coastal Area Management Act "to allow certain types of redevelopment within urban waterfronts that historically have a pattern of urban-level development."

This important change let downtown restaurants and other businesses connect more seamlessly with the riverfront, allowing for the unique and vibrant riverfront dining experience we enjoy today. The change also allowed the Riverwalk's path to extend uninterrupted around the historic J.W. Brooks building.

The bill also benefited Morehead City, New Bern, Beaufort and other North Carolina towns with urban waterfronts, boosting the state's coastal economy. And despite the warnings at the time from the state's Coastal Resources Commission, there have been no negative environmental effects. In fact, allowing people to enjoy the waterfronts in such an intimate way has likely increased awareness of the beauty and uniqueness of the areas and bolstered support for essential conservation efforts.

Liquor by the drink

If you've enjoyed a cocktail downtown, you probably took it for granted. You shouldn't. It wasn't that long ago that it would not have been allowed. Once again, an impractical law was handcuffing downtown's comeback.

Under its archaic system of regulating liquor sales, restaurants and bars could not serve mixed drinks with hard alcohol; only beer and wine were allowed. You could, however, if your county and municipality allowed it, bring along an entire bottle of your own liquor — called "brown bagging" — and purchase servings of mixers from the establishment you were in.

North Carolina finally changed the law to allow for the sale of liquor by the drink, but the option was left up to local governments.

Promoters of our local tourism and hospitality industries knew that such an option was needed here if downtown, the beaches and other areas were to reach their full potential as popular destinations. Fledgling restaurants in downtown especially needed the enticement that serving mixed beverages created, as well as the extra revenue.

A local committee was formed to support the passage of a liquor by-the-drink referendum in Wilmington and New Hanover County. After a colorful campaign, it passed by a 2-1 margin in January 1979. The issue was never about whether people could or could not consume hard liquor — it simply was about how they imbibed. A popular slogan for the pro-mixed-drink group showed a caricature of an inebriated man saying, "I only wanted one drink, but I had to buy a bottle."

Next time: The completion of Interstate 40 had a major economic impact on Wilmington, including downtown.

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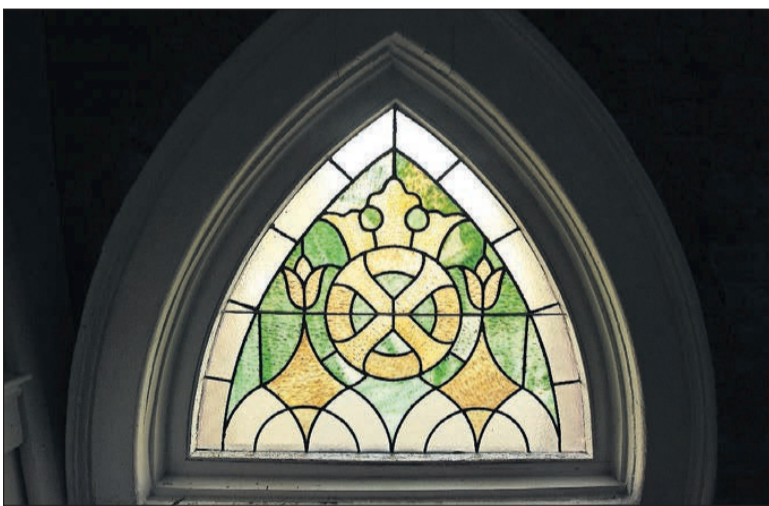


The interior of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church after restoration. The building is now the Brooklyn Arts Center. [STARNEWS FILE PHOTOS]

Historic church became symbol of new life for North Fourth



Before its restoration, bracing had to be added to the St. Andrew's Church building to keep the walls from collapsing.



In 1998, Hurricane Bonnie further damaged the already deteriorating St. Andrew's Church building.



The manse at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

