

Nikki Haley's 44th birthday is this week. You would think her a little old for fairy tales.

But a bizarre, little-reported remark the South Carolina governor made last week suggests that, age notwithstanding, Haley lives in Fantasyland, at least insofar as American history is concerned.

The comment in question came the day after her Tuesday night speech in response to President Obama's State of the Union address, in which she cuffed Donald Trump for his strident anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant bigotry.

Haley told reporters, "When you've got immigrants who are coming here legally, we've never in the history of this country passed any laws or done anything based on race or religion."

WOW

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Some observers found that an astonishing thing for her to say as chief executive of the first state to secede from the Union in defense of slavery, a state that embraced segregation until forced to change by the federal government. Others observed that any fair reading of Haley's quote makes it pretty clear she was speaking only in the context of legal immigration.

They're right. The problem is, even if you concede that point, Haley is still grotesquely wrong. She thinks no immigration laws have been passed "based on race or religion"? What about:

The Naturalization Act of 1790, which extended citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person ..."?

Leonard Pitts



Or the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, whose title and intent are self-explanatory?

Or the Immigration Act of 1917, which banned immigrants from East Asia and the Pacific?

Or Ozawa v. U.S., the 1922 Supreme Court decision which declared that Japanese immigrants could not be naturalized?

Or U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind, the 1923 high court ruling which said people from India — like Haley's parents — could not become naturalized citizens?

So, yes, however you slice it, Haley is wrong and Haley is ignorant. But one wonders if Haley is to blame.

Americans, the historian Ray Arsenault once said, live by "mythic conceptions of what they think happened" in the past.

And as school systems, under pressure from conservative school boards, retreat from teaching that which embarrasses the nation's self-image, as ethnic

studies classes are outlawed, as textbooks are scrubbed of painfully inconvenient truths, as standards requiring the teaching of only "positive aspects" of American history are imposed, we find those mythic conceptions encroaching reality to a troubling degree.

Suddenly, slaves become immigrants and settlers. The Civil War has nothing to do with slavery. Martin Luther King becomes a Tea Party member. And America has never passed laws "based on race and religion."

The very stuff of America

Yes, Haley's ignorance might be willful. There's surely a lot of that going around. But it might also be that she's simply part of that generation which has been taught fairy tales under the guise of history.

Such teaching will leave you comfortably indoctrinated in a kind of civic mythology — and

wholly unprepared to interpret or contextualize what's happening before your eyes.

To wit: What makes Donald Trump's proposed restrictions on Muslims troubling is not that they represent the coming of something new, but the return of something old, a shameful strain in the American psyche that we have seen too many times before.

It is not a deviation from America, but the very stuff of America — an ugly scapegoating that has too often besmirched our character and beguiled us away from our most luminous ideals.

This is something all of us should know, but do not. As a state official, perhaps a candidate for vice president, perhaps eventually a president of the United States, Nikki Haley might someday change history.

It would be good if she understood it first.

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