

INBOX

Gardner Museum director: Why we closed our doors to a climate protest

Art museums are places of beauty and solace. They hold profound expressions of our humanity. They are sites of connection with art and with one another. They are portals through which we examine the relevance of the past to our present. And yes, they are centers of public discourse, where community members can safely gather to exchange ideas.

On Sept. 7, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was forced to close in response to a planned protest by the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (“Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum closed Thursday night to thwart climate protest,” BostonGlobe.com, Sept. 8). The decision to shut our doors was not made lightly, especially on a night when admission was free — it is demoralizing to curtail public access to the magic of the Gardner.

The Boston chapter of the group said it would use the museum as a “space of public discourse (like Isabella Gardner imagined it in her will).” It’s true that our founder valued conversation and the exchange of views. However, public discourse entails respectful dialogue into which participants enter willingly. Discourse prioritizes the interrogative over the declarative, allowing a multiplicity of voices, not forced confrontation and potential risk to people and artworks.

Extinction Rebellion did not contact the Gardner prior to its planned action to explain its intentions or discuss possible alternatives, such as staging the protest on the museum’s front lawn. The group asserts that it does not damage works of art, but the actions of this group at other museums demonstrate the real risk of damage to these fragile, priceless works.

The Gardner Museum supports efforts to heighten awareness of the climate crisis. Our building addition is LEED Gold certified. We are members of the Boston Green Ribbon Commission and engaged with the city’s climate action plan. Our exhibition “Presence of Plants in Contemporary Art” features artists who themselves are climate activists. We are holding two public panels addressing climate justice this fall. These are the actions that further discourse on environmental stewardship within an art museum.

We urge Extinction Rebellion to reconsider its tactics targeting art museums. In the meantime, we continue to embrace our role in providing inspiration, connection, and meaning for our communities in Boston and beyond.

PEGGY FOGELMAN
Norma Jean Calderwood Director
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SCOT LEHIGH

Joe Biden needs to get out of his cocoon

It’s a recurring pandemic — and the infection is spreading. No, I don’t mean the new variant of COVID-19. I’m talking about growing apprehension about Joe Biden as a 2024 presidential candidate.

A man who once made a point of mock-jogging to event podiums now moves with a stiff and arthritic gait. Meanwhile, there’s a veritable conservative cottage industry intent on portraying the Democratic incumbent as deep-in-his-dotage.

That is not the Biden you see engaged in small talk with reporters or

ic activist who asked not to be named. Biden’s decision to do so has kept the next generation of Democratic leaders on the sidelines.

Reinforcing that worry are these two realities: The president isn’t getting much by way of job-approval credit beyond that of the Democratic base, despite an impressive list of achievements and a national economy whose strength and resilience continue to defy expectations. Although fading in intensity, the lingering toothache of inflation appears to have kept voters from a broader appraisal of the overall record.

Second, most of the GOP presidential

dent might prompt such a reconsideration: Rather than limiting his media interactions to short exchanges taking questions from a list of preselected reporters, as he did in Vietnam, he should hold regular, free-wheeling press conferences.

But there’s a problem with Biden being Biden that goes beyond his history as a gaffe generator.

In such an environment, he’d find himself facing persistent queries about his son Hunter, who, with his plea deal having fallen apart, may now face criminal indictment on federal felony firearms charges.

Despite conservative media’s repeated allegations and insinuations that foreign payments to Hunter-controlled accounts constitute bribery of the president, no credible evidence of that has emerged. That, however, didn’t keep a pressured House Speaker Kevin McCarthy from opening an impeachment inquiry on Tuesday.

Still, Hunter was clearly buck-raking in an area adjacent to his father’s vice-presidential policy space — and the supposed firewall between the two wasn’t impenetrable enough to keep his son from peddling a perception of influence.

Thus far, the president, who bristles at or ignores reporters when the subject of Hunter comes up, hasn’t addressed that matter forthrightly, let alone in a way that might quell public doubts. Quite the contrary: Despite Joe Biden’s claim that he didn’t talk with his son about his business ventures, in the recent CNN poll, some 61 percent thought Biden had had some involvement there.

So the president’s curt denials clearly haven’t done the trick. Now, if worries about the Hunter imbroglia factor into the calculus keeping the president in his cloistered cocoon, then the filial foofaraw has reached the point where it’s compounding a very real sense of political peril.

In that sense, it really is a Biden family problem.

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hear about from various officials who have spoken with him. Further, it’s instructive to remember that we heard similar senility claims from right-wing media mavens in 2020 — only to have Biden top Donald Trump in both fall presidential debates. In like fashion, he outmaneuvered congressional Republicans in impromptu State of the Union speech sparring. And as those who watched his remarks in Vietnam saw, he discusses foreign policy complexities with ease.

But assumptions rush in to fill a political vacuum, particularly when what the public most regularly sees is a slow-moving president whose appearances are carefully scripted and controlled. And one who is prone to asserting somewhat self-aggrandizing things that are at considerable variance with the facts.

Poll after poll shows that most Americans have concluded Biden is too old to serve a second term. Indeed, a distinct foreboding holds sway on the left.

“I have yet to meet one Democrat who thought it was a good idea for Joe Biden to run again,” said one Democrat-

hopefuls are at least in neck-and-neck races with Biden in polling. Democrats take solace in the notion that Trump, who faces four separate sets of criminal indictments, seemingly has little room to grow.

“I sleep comfortably knowing that if this ends up being Biden and Trump, it doesn’t matter what the public says it wants, they will go with Biden,” said veteran political consultant Michael Goldman. “But I worry that it is not going to be Trump.”

In that light, the recent CNN poll that shows former South Carolina governor and United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley beating Biden 49 percent to 43 percent may be most worrying. Despite a good first GOP debate, Haley heretofore has hardly been considered a prepossessing political figure. Her numbers may indicate that if voters think they have a palatable, only mildly MAGA alternative, they may be ready to embrace her over Biden. That would comport with the widespread judgment that Biden is too old to run again.

It’s hard to persuade voters to revisit judgments like those. One way the presi-

JEFF JACOBY

Conservatives should embrace ‘Lift Every Voice’

The 2023 NFL season opened Thursday night at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Mo., where the visiting Detroit Lions upset the reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs, 21-20.

As usual, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was sung immediately before kickoff. The performer was Natalie Grant, one of the most popular recording artists in contemporary Christian music — she has been named female vocalist of the year five times by the Gospel Music Association. Her rendition of the national anthem had the crowd cheering, especially when she pointed skyward while singing: “Gave proof through the night / that our flag was still there.”

Before Grant’s star turn, however, the Kansas City Boys Choir and Kansas City Girls Choir joined in a performance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the hymn often referred to as the Black national anthem. In 2020, the NFL authorized teams to feature the song at home openers ahead of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Though most fans listened courteously, there was an immediate outpouring of bitterness and snark by a minority who complained that the song was an exercise in racial divisiveness and accused football officials of including it in the pregame ceremonies for those who “love the idea of segregation.” Kari Lake, a Republican who ran unsuccessfully for governor of Arizona last year, tweeted an image of herself sitting, along with a defiant message: “The NFL is still trying to force this divisive nonsense down America’s throats. I won’t stand for it. Literally.” She and other MAGA conservatives had previously fumed when “Lift Every Voice” was performed before the Super Bowl in February.

Intolerant political correctness is usually a left-wing phenomenon. But this is a good example of right-wing political correctness.

I have never understood why sport-

ing events should be preceded by the national anthem. After all, we don’t stand for “The Star-Spangled Banner” when we go to the theater or an amusement park. Why at ball games? The practice began as a morale-booster during the 1918 World Series. But once it became routine, it became devalued, as witness all the spectators talk or text right through it.

Nonetheless, the custom of opening sporting events with the national an-



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP

Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, second from right, stood with teammates during a performance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” before a home game on Sept. 7.

them and other patriotic displays remains firmly entrenched. At Arrowhead Stadium last week, in addition to Grant’s performance, there was a presentation of the colors by the Jackson County Sheriff’s Office Honor Guard and a flyover of B-2 Stealth Bombers by squadrons from nearby Whiteman Air Force Base. Whatever else might be said about the pregame events in Kansas City, they were replete with patriotic and martial symbolism.

Which makes the mean-spirited attacks on the kids singing “Lift Every Voice” not just ugly but ridiculous. Nothing about their earnest performance was divisive, let alone unpatriotic. Nor was there any suggestion that it was intended for Black listeners alone — the song is a hymn of hope and confidence in the American future, with no hint of racial animus.

The lyrics were written in 1899 by

James Weldon Johnson, a Black educator, diplomat, and poet. They were set to music the following year by his brother, the composer J. Rosamond Johnson, for a celebration of Lincoln’s birthday in Jacksonville, Fla. At its debut, “Lift Every Voice” was sung by a chorus of 500 children.

It was the NAACP that dubbed the song the “Black national anthem,” but its words embody no hint of racial separatism or belligerence. To the contrary: It expresses a message of uplift, unity, and optimism. And it is fundamentally religious — a prayer for God’s blessing and protection:

*Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.*

Former NFL cornerback Troy Vincent has recalled that singing “Lift Every Voice” was part of the morning ritual when he was a child attending Jefferson Elementary School in Trenton, N.J. “We sang along with it right before placing our hands over our hearts and pledging allegiance to the American flag,” he wrote.

“Lift Every Voice” has been recorded many times. Online you can hear one rendition, beautiful and stately, sung by the choir of New York’s Abyssinian Baptist Church in 2016. Another, quite different but no less powerful, was performed by Kim Weston for Motown in 1968. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir in 2018 recorded a mighty uttempo version, backed by a full orchestra. The Kansas City boys and girls who sang before the Chiefs-Lions game last week had no accompaniment, but their music was full of heart, patriotism, and faith. If anyone should appreciate those qualities, conservatives should.

This column is adapted from the current issue of Arguable, Jeff Jacoby’s weekly email newsletter. To subscribe to Arguable, visit globe.com/arguable. Jeff Jacoby can be reached at jeff.jacoby@globe.com.

Plan to shut Leominster hospital’s maternity unit is a callous move

Many of us would like to consider ourselves compassionate people. Since we all, to varying degrees, have experienced being vulnerable, with all the anguish and uncertainty that entails, we want to protect those at the mercy of the powerful or callous. We believe such care signifies an unspoken social contract, a badge of necessity in a civilized society. Still, we know the needy are often disregarded, even by those best positioned to help.

A case in point is the looming decision of UMass Memorial Health to shutter its maternity ward in Leominster on Sept. 23, a closure that would decimate essential health care and birthing services for pregnant women in North Central Massachusetts (“State seeks delay in maternity unit closure,” Metro, Sept. 2). If the decision is enacted, it would mean that corporate well-being, even in medicine — a field sworn to first do no harm — trumped the health of women and their babies.

The plan also suggests disregard of a fresh report from the state Department of Public Health that shows that women of color, especially Black women, are suffering and dying disproportionately during childbirth.

In 1966, writer James Baldwin saw the depth of our social crisis, noting, “Where is the civilization and where, indeed, is the morality which can afford to destroy so many?” Isn’t it clear by now we can’t afford it?

R. JAY AND AUDELIZ ALLAIN
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Who exactly are those critics of Lexington’s inclusive curriculum?

Re “In Lexington, a battle over curriculum: Many at meeting support diversity and inclusion program targeted in petition” (Metro, Sept. 6): Your article about an online protest against the “Serious Talks” curriculum in Lexington Public Schools is framed as a fight, but I have observed broad approval of this curriculum among Lexington residents. “Serious Talks” in the classroom is intended to support students of all races, genders, and abilities.

What’s more, as the story notes, the petition against this teaching is signed by people who are anonymous. There is no ability to judge how they represent the opinion of people who actually live in Lexington. This is in contrast to a petition in support of this program, which includes more than 1,000 signers who have declared both their names and their relationship to the town. Nearly all these signers are residents.

HARRY FORSDICK
Lexington

The writer is a Town Meeting member and moderator of the Lexington List, an email discussion board whose members must register by name.