



Ignore National Review

The politically correct army of the WASP (Weak America Secret Police) has no doubt been rounding up Americans of the Mittonian persuasion, who remain old-fashioned and patriotic enough to say they favor a strong America.

Likewise, Jonah Goldberg, syndicated columnist and editor of National Review Online. Not surprisingly, Goldberg is willing to give Arizona senator and putative GOP presidential nominee John McCain the benefit of a doubt concerning the suspicions (they do not rise to the level of allegations) published in a page one New York Times story of, shall we call it, an “inappropriate relationship” between the straight talking “maverick” senator and an attractive female lobbyist 30 years his junior. But Goldberg wants to make sure the reader understands that Jonah stands foursquare with God and traditional morality. And he is willing to go out on a limb to say so. “As unfashionable as it is to say these days, adultery is wrong,” Goldberg assures us.



Heck, Goldberg will even go out on the proverbial limb to defend things even more controversial than marital fidelity. He will defend, for example, torture of prisoners held by the U.S. and our allies in the great, never-ending “war on terror.” And he is willing, perhaps even happy, to defend a president who claims for himself the right to imprison American citizens and hold them indefinitely, without charges or trial, if he suspects them of being “enemy combatants.” And of course, we all know how unlikely it is that the OML (Our Maximum Leader) would have faulty intelligence as to who may or may not be an “enemy combatant.” Right?

Goldberg, National Review senior something-or-other Mark Steyn and Rob Long, editor of something else, were all in Manchester, New Hampshire on the weekend preceding the New Hampshire primary. They were onstage in a conference room at the Radisson Hotel in an event sponsored by Thomas More College, located in nearby Merrimack. They pontificated among themselves, having a jolly good time of it, as Steyn would no doubt be inclined to say, every once in a while interrupting their semi-private conversation to take a question from the floor.

One of the questioners was yours truly. I recalled that when I began reading National Review in the long-ago Goldwater days of my youth, editor William F. Buckley, Jr. was frequently inveighing against “Caesarism.” Caesar then, I noted, was Lyndon Johnson. Today it is George W. Bush. And National Review has said “yea” and “amen” to his claims of extraordinary and unconstitutional powers, including



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the above-mentioned power to imprison indefinitely, without charges or trial, anyone the president designates as an “enemy combatant.”

“Why,” I asked, “did National Review abandon freedom and learn to love Caesar.”

Well, there was a slight twitter of laughter that went through the audience and a moment’s hesitation on stage. Goldberg leaned forward to see which of two wished to respond. Mr. Long said he was from Southern California, which drew some laughter, but I confess I did not get, and still don’t get, the joke. Mr. Steyn, a citizen of the United Kingdom who, for some reason resides in the western part of New Hampshire, said he would take a stab at it.

He began with some irrelevant chatter about monarchy and how he was not really in favor of it in America and how he hoped we would not consent to being governed by just two families, the Bushes and the Clintons, sort of like the Tudors and the Plantagenets once upon a time in jolly old England. He even noted that we seemed to be growing political dynasties in New Hampshire, what with our Greggs and Bases and Sununus and what have you.

Then he got to the point. He dismissed as absurd the notion that freedom was under attack by the central government in America. Why just that very day, or perhaps it was the day before, he had seen Dartmouth students picketing about something or other and how much more evidence of freedom of speech could you want than that?

I commented that I had just come from the campus of Saint Anselm College a few miles away, where the presidential debates were about to be staged. I noted that the “free speech zone” was a good half-mile away, well out of sight and out of earshot of the Dana Center, where the debates would be held. No unauthorized person was allowed any closer to the event the picketers were picketing. I mentioned that I had thought the intent of the First Amendment was to make all America a “free speech zone.”

Well, never mind he said. There I was asking tough questions and making accusations, a perfect example of the degree to which the freedom of speech is tolerated in the United States and even by editors of National Review. It was a misleading, but a superficially appealing argument. I recall decades earlier, John Roche, then the president of Americans for Democratic Action, said of antiwar protestors, “I’ve never heard so many people screaming at the top of their lungs that they are being gagged.” It was funny when Roche said it and it got a lot of laughs when I repeated it a few years later in a college classroom. But let us pause for something that happens all too seldom in political speeches or debates and give this a moment’s thought.

Mr. Steyn seemed to be suggesting that if freedom of speech is not under attack everywhere, then it is not being threatened anywhere. He had, after all, seen with his own eyes, Dartmouth students demonstrating in Hanover. So how much could freedom of speech be under attack? Mr. Roche had heard the shouts of protestors in a number of venues. Where was the threat to free speech? To invoke the old Groucho Marx line, who are we to believe the disgruntled protestors or our own eyes and ears?

But really the inverse is true. If freedom of speech is being suppressed anywhere in our fair land it is threatened everywhere. The fact that people who wish to demonstrate their grievances before the presidential candidates are not allowed anywhere near the event they are picketing and are left to, in effect, picket the college library and the Benedictine monastery, is hardly evidence of the robust health of free speech in America. And the fact that someone might stand up at a microphone and publicly question the political judgment or commitment to freedom of a popular conservative journal is no reason to dismiss concerns about the suspension of habeas corpus at the whim of the president of the



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United States.

But Mr. Steyn insisted I was insulting and belittling the suffering of those who had endured real tyranny, in Eastern and Central Europe and elsewhere, by calling Mr. Bush a Caesar or a fascist. I had not used the term “fascist” or “fascism,” but Mr. Steyn cleverly slipped it in. I briefly considered but did not have a chance to ask whether Mr. Buckley had been demeaning the suffering of the peoples behind the Iron Curtain when he deplored Lyndon Johnson’s “Caesarism.”

Finally, Mr. Steyn challenged me on my assertion that President Bush has “claimed” the power to imprison citizens without trial. He demanded to know if I knew of anyone who had been so imprisoned. “Jose Padilla,” I responded reflexively, as he no doubt anticipated. “I don’t know him personally, but—” “Oh, yes!” he replied, with an “Aha!” demeanor. “Jose Padilla. That’s the one case they always throw up at us.”

“There have been others,” I argued.

“There was one other,” Goldberg jumped in. In that case, he noted, the Supreme Court told the administration it would have to charge or release the prisoner and the president and the Justice Department complied. What kind of tyranny is that?

“And National Review condemned the court for so ruling and defended the administration’s position,” I pointed out.

“Never mind the magazine!” Goldberg said. He was defending not his publication, but his president. By that time even I had forgotten that the whole point of my original question was about the magazine.

“Two people out of a nation of 300 million,” Steyn chimed in again. (Mr. Long, being still from southern California, was no doubt meditating on the surf at Malibu.) I imagine the number of people tortured by the Spanish Inquisition was not a very large percentage of the overall population of Spain. And I suppose the number of people actually beheaded by King Henry VIII was a small portion of Great Britain.

There was more exchange. At one point I asked Steyn, the Englishman, where he stood on the Magna Carta. He said he was for it, but, of course, he was not under oath. Steyn invoked Abraham Lincoln as a precedent.

“Lincoln was a tyrant,” I answered matter of factly, much to the dismay of some of the loyal Republicans present.

“Oh, so you’re against any American president in time of war!” Steyn charged. Then he demanded to know what I thought of the internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War II. I told him I believed it was disgraceful and the United States Supreme Court eventually ruled it was a clear violation of the rights of those Americans who were herded into detention camps. The United States has since apologized for that incident, a bit of U.S. history Mr. Steyn might have missed.

By the time he was done, the gentleman (I will give him the benefit of a doubt) had clearly implied that I was not a very loyal, patriotic American and had been roundly applauded for so doing. I have discovered that one sure way to make yourself unpopular at almost any gathering of Republicans or self-identified conservatives is to speak up for the Bill of Rights. It apparently is not among the things they wish to “conserve.”

As for Mr. Steyn’s remarks, I don’t care to have my patriotism questioned by anyone. But if it is to be



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challenged at all, I would prefer it be by someone who has gone through the trouble of becoming a citizen in the land in which he lives and whose freedoms he enjoys, even if he would deny them to others who are citizens.

Mr. Goldberg observed that I had held the microphone for a rather long time and that if I wished to continue the discussion “I will be happy to—well, I won’t be happy to, but I will be willing to discuss this with you further afterwards.” I quickly let him know he need not bother.

“When you’re ready to endorse the Bill of Rights, you can talk to me,” I said as my parting shot. I left soon after, but I took away with me Mr. Goldberg’s advice concerning his publication: “Never mind the magazine!”

That is good advice, advice that I have, for the most part, already been following.

Jack Kenny is a free-lance writer who has been living in New Hampshire since the (now deceased) Old Man of the Mountain was the new kid on the molehill. He is either a paleolithic conservative or a born-again libertarian, who first arrived in the Granite State 36 years ago to volunteer in the presidential primary campaign of Ohio Congressman John Ashbrook against Richard Nixon, the semi-honorable “incumbent.” (We were not entirely successful.) He was for Pat Buchanan in ’92 and ’96, has voted for Howard Phillips and is a survivor of the somewhat premature Goldwater Victory Rally at Madison Square Garden in October of 1964. Photo courtesy of Susan Laughlin.



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