

## Shelf Life: Everybody's Bill of Rights

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By Michael Potemra

Americans are justly concerned whenever it becomes obvious that the freedoms of speech and religion are under attack. But sometimes the threats are least visible when they are in plain sight - that is to say, when the group being discriminated against is one "everybody" supposedly dislikes. In his fine new book, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (Regnery, 416 pp., \$27.95), David Limbaugh makes the compelling case that in today's America, it's the freedom of expression of Christians that often gets short shrift. The chancellor of New York City public schools, for example, declared that at Christmastime, no Nativity scenes would be permitted on school grounds; any pretense that this was an act in defense of the state's religious neutrality vanished when it was reported that there would be no similar ukase against Jewish menorahs, or against Islamic and Kwanzaa symbols.

It's easy to see how this state of affairs came about: In the conventional secular psyche, Christians are not viewed primarily as individuals with the same rights as anyone else, but rather dehumanized into avatars of an outdated and overthrown past oppression. If John Q. Citizen espouses an unpopular view or religion, he is a person whose whims can be safely indulged; but if John Q. Citizen happens to be a Christian, he needs to be carefully circumscribed -- lest he and his cronies return us to the days of witch-burning. As Limbaugh makes clear, however, the typical American Christian is not a lurking ayatollah. The author himself reassures readers that he is not, for example, calling for the public schools to return to the "Christian-oriented education" of years past; what he wants is simple fairness.

Limbaugh addresses all the familiar hot-button issues -- the Ten Commandments in public buildings, secularist curricula in the schools, etc. -- but some of the best sections of the book discuss more recondite concerns, such as discrimination against churches in local zoning decisions. In fact, these low-profile matters make Limbaugh's case more effectively than some of the hotter issues. Even those who declare a strict faith in "separation of church and state" will realize that an injustice is being done when a couple hosts a quiet weekly prayer meeting for six to eight people -- and receives a letter from the city planning board to desist, on the grounds that they are running a church in a residential area. That's a clear case of Big Brother's overreach -- and even Clarence Darrow would protest.

-- George Mason University law professor David E. Bernstein takes on a similar menace in *You Can't Say That!: The Growing Threat to Civil Liberties from Antidiscrimination Laws* (Cato, 197 pp., \$20). This excellent book demonstrates that, in case after case, "activists" for one cause or another have shown a willingness to trample on the rights of others. In the name of weeding out bigotry and male chauvinism, political conservatives are silenced by campus speech codes at public universities; in the name of tolerance, religious landlords are forced to accept tenants of

whom they disapprove morally; in the name of defeating homophobia, the New Jersey supreme court tried to make itself the final arbiter of who should and should not be admitted to the Boy Scouts.

The book offers a wide array of these horror stories; against them all, Bernstein offers a reservoir of common sense and fair play. He points out that, on basic principles, even those who clamor most loudly for these state intrusions would be wiser to eschew them. He quotes the legendary individualist Albert Jay Nock: "Whatever power you give the State to do things for you carries with it the equivalent power to do things to you."

A friend of mine many years ago suggested a bumper sticker that would capture the self-contradictory nature of much of the antidiscrimination agenda: "CRUSH INTOLERANCE." Bernstein suggests a better way -- "asking Americans to display a measure of fortitude in the face of offense and discrimination." He recognizes that this "is asking for a lot . . . in these days of the Oprahization of public discourse." But, over the long run, it's our only hope for preserving freedom.

-- "FDR saved capitalism": This is one of the hoariest pieces of conventional political wisdom. If FDR hadn't reassured Depression-era Americans with New Deal measures, the argument goes, the country might have turned socialist -- or worse. In *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (Crown Forum, 336 pp., \$27.50), historian Jim Powell demonstrates that the opposite is true. FDR's misguided centralist policies, anti-business demagoguery, and punitive tax increases blighted the prospect of recovery. One of Roosevelt's own advisers, Randolph E. Paul, later admitted that the tax policies had "intensified the depression they were working to correct." It's well known that Ronald Reagan venerated FDR as America's leader in hard times; nor was he alone in this, among members of his generation. But the next time economic cataclysm looms, leaders should read Jim Powell's book -- so that we can have some of FDR's moral uplift without his disastrously counterproductive policies.

-- *Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror* (Regnery, 317 pp., \$27.95), by Richard Minter, is a sad tale of missed opportunities. The reader knows, all too well, how it will end; nonetheless, page after turned page, the level of poignant suspense rises. "If you want bin Laden," said the Sudanese foreign minister to U.S. officials in 1996, "we will give you bin Laden." But there was no deal. After the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa, President Clinton ordered spectacularly ineffective missile strikes against the bin Ladenists, and subsequently approved covert actions that Minter describes as "a series of heartbreaking half-measures." At one point, the CIA was even pressuring Afghanistan's Northern Alliance fighters not to try to kill bin Laden. After the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, a meeting of key Clinton administration officials -- including Madeleine Albright and William Cohen -- discussed a proposal for retaliation against bin Laden, but nitpicked it to death with objections. One official present at the meeting, says Minter, was "incredulous and frustrated," and asked a colleague afterwards: "What's it going to take to get them to hit al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? Does al-Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon?"

We cannot demand that our public officials act with a level of wisdom and discernment that only hindsight can offer. But they do benefit from the occasional chastening reminder that dithering

carries with it a cost -- and sometimes a horrible one. Minitzer offers not just an indictment of one past administration, but a cautionary tale for all who will follow.

-- Joel Mowbray is a passionate and enterprising young investigative reporter, some of whose best work has appeared in these pages. In *Dangerous Diplomacy: How the State Department Threatens America's Security* (Regnery, 312 pp., \$27.95), he tells the sobering story of the derelictions of duty of our foreign-policy bureaucrats. Conservative complaints about State Department "cookie-pushers" are nothing new, but Mowbray's book paints a vivid picture of the harmful real-life consequences of State's bad habits.

One especially troubling pathology at State is a devotion to cultivating "stability" (in foreign governments, and in world affairs generally) even at the expense of other highly important desiderata, such as protecting human rights and even exercising ordinary prudence. When the assistant secretary of state for South Asia said (in 1996, when there was already clear evidence to the contrary) that "the Taliban do not seek to 'export Islam,' just to 'liberate Afghanistan,'" it was not an isolated mistake. As Mowbray shows in detail, State initially viewed the Taliban insurgency as positive on a number of levels. Of course, it would be unrealistic to ask that every diplomat be another Jeane Kirkpatrick. But a truth-based diplomacy will do more, finally, to advance our national interest than any number of clever circumlocutions; this is the central lesson of Mowbray's valuable book.

-- For 18 years, a Ph.D. in economics tried to teach his often-recalcitrant colleagues in the U.S. House of Representatives how the free market works -- and why it works better when they don't try to help. That Dick Arme is no professorial Dryasdust is well known to anyone who saw him in action as House majority leader; his new book -- *Arme's Axioms: 40 Hard-Earned Truths from Politics, Faith, and Life* (Wiley, \$22.95, 258 pp.) -- offers an engaging sampler of his best material. Unquestionably a man of principle, he also recognizes that -- as one of his axioms has it -- "if you are always standing on principle, you are going nowhere." The book contains life lessons as well as advice on strictly political matters. "You can't get ahead while you're getting even," for example, is an axiom of the broadest applicability, as is "Don't go back and check on a dead skunk." Arme concludes his book with a wry aside: "Oh, by the way, it is perfectly consistent with being idealistic about America to be cynical about Washington."

-- *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 146 pp.), edited by James Leming, Lucien Ellington, and Kathleen Porter, answers a key question in the education debate, and does so in a highly readable and engaging way. The schools are infected, writes contributor Jonathan Burack, with "a multiculturalism that is neither 'multi' nor 'cultural'" -- and it's time to restore honesty and depth to the historical narrative that children are taught. This book can be read online, free of charge, at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net), the website of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.