

LXXVIII – Kicking the Bully's Dog

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By Butler Shaffer

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Boobus Americanus — a species brought to our attention by H.L. Mencken – has long been torn between two competing sentiments: the first, born of self-righteousness, demands the punishment of wrongdoers, with the penalty having less to do with the wrong than with the need to relieve some deeper, unrequited sense of anger. This need for punitive reaction becomes most troubling when a wrong is perpetrated not upon the physical being of Boobus, but upon a collective identity he shares.

But against whom does one direct his or her anger? Sometimes one cannot clearly identify the wrongdoer or, if the miscreant is known, he may not be available for his due. This was part of the problem with Americans' reactions to the events of 9/11. The only known participants in this murderous scheme were themselves dead, nineteen suicide bombers who, in their minds apparently, were bent on bringing America to justice!

How does one punish dead people, particularly dead people whose bodies cannot even be located? There is too much moral ambiguity and deficiency in simply declaring "all known conspirators are dead; there is nothing more to be done." Boobus's sense of "justice" would not tolerate such a response. Just as a lynch mob will go in search of any stranger to string up for the burning of the Branmash barn, some suitable target had to be found upon whom to direct Boobus's anger for having been made to feel vulnerable.

It took no time for the lynch mob mentality to become mobilized by George Bush and his neocon plotters. We were told that the World Trade Center attacks were part of a wider conspiracy than these nineteen dead kamikaze agents; that Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, North Korea – indeed, any nation that would not sign on to the neocon campaign — were all involved in an effort to destroy America because they "hate our freedoms."

The idea that nineteen men would go to the lengths they did to train themselves, commandeer airliners, and crash them into buildings knowing they would die in the process – all in order to protest the availability of convenience stores, MTV, cut-off blue jeans, and other expressions of what confused people regard as expressions of "freedom" – is so ludicrous that only the dullards at Fox News could utter this party line with a straight face. Bush and his neocons then rushed the Patriot Act through Congress — with the obliging help of legislators who didn't even bother to read it, thus demonstrating the irrelevancy of

this branch of government. As a matter of national pride, George Bush let the world know that it is the prerogative of the American government — not foreigners — to destroy the liberties of Americans!

At first blush, one would think that the Bush administration would have needed a plausible substitute target to attack. But the post 9/11 experience has shown the fallacy of such a position. Boobus was so enraged over these attacks that anyone would have been a satisfactory scapegoat. I could even imagine George Bush going on television to announce the discovery of a "terrorist link" between Lapland and Tierra del Fuego, complete with references to their "polar" relationship. Most Americans would simply fall into line, without much deviation from orthodoxy. How else can one fairly assess the significant support Bush continues to receive despite the revelations of his and his administration's cascade of lies on behalf of his wars?

To those in self-righteous pursuit of collective "justice," truth becomes little more than one of a number of suitable strategies for achieving preconceived ends. For the Bush administration, and its Boobus Americanus supporters, the "end" was the unleashing of reactive rage against anyone who could be made to suffer for 9/11. Even the French were vilified for refusing to join in the crusade. The lies that were to serve as the foundation of the war against Iraq kept changing ("imminent threat of nuclear or chemical attack" to "they have weapons of mass destruction" to "they have the intent to procure WMD's" to "bring democracy to Iraq" to "liberate the Iraqi women" to "end torture and political murder"). None of this mattered to Boobus, as long as the killing of foreigners continued.

Lest you regard this as an overstatement, consider the words of one of the most vocal war advocates, Bill O'Reilly. On his June 17, 2004 radio broadcast — long after all the administration lies had been revealed — O'Reilly became upset with an Iraqi opinion poll that showed only two percent of the Iraqi people supported America's attack upon their country. This was more than his self-righteousness could take. In an angry outburst of balloon-juice, he declared: "when you have Americans dying trying to, you know, institute some kind of democracy there, and two percent of the people appreciate it, you know, it's time — time to wise up." America should not intervene in the Muslim world again, he went on, but in the meantime "What we can do is bomb the living daylights out of them, just like we did in the Balkans. . . . Bomb the living daylights out of them." A moment's reflection should cause one to realize that O'Reilly's remarks are directed not solely against the Iraqi people — who had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11 — but with mankind generally: if you do not conform yourself to his visions for you; if you do not fully appreciate the pain and misery the American government is putting you through for your own good; you will be destroyed. Such is the meaning of "justice" to Boobus Americanus!

This self-righteous insistence upon "justice" runs into an opposing factor, the competing sentiment of which I spoke earlier. What if the "wrong" has been committed by a stronger party than yourself, particularly one with which you identify yourself? Are you prepared to

take on the tough issues with the really tough guys?

There has long been a saying to the effect that someone who is unwilling to take on a bully will, instead, kick the bully's dog. The victim of bullying, in other words, himself becomes a bully to those he perceives as weaker. If you have a grievance against a stronger party, transfer it to a safe target. Is this why we insist upon the death penalty for those who murder other individuals, but bestow the Nobel Peace Prize on those who help to engineer the slaughter of tens of thousands of war victims? This is O'Reilly's response to the Iraqi people. In effect he, and the rest of Boobus Americanus, are implicitly declaring that they are too cowardly to confront the American government's policies and practices that led up to 9/11, and so will satisfy themselves with attacks on lesser nations — particularly those without weapons of mass destruction who are less likely to fight back.

A further example of weak people kicking the bully's dog is seen in the conviction and sentencing of Martha Stewart for allegedly lying (not under oath) about acts that were not criminal to begin with. Coming at a time when the corruption inherent in corporate-state politics has been revealed even to Boobus, Martha became a convenient scapegoat for people who were too cowardly to condemn — or even question — the enormous advantages secured by some business interests not through the marketplace, but through their connections with the political establishment.

Martha sold her own property (shares of stock) in the marketplace. She defrauded no one, stole nothing, committed no act of victimization upon any other person. Like her predecessor scapegoat, Michael Milken, Martha is an ambitious, aggressive entrepreneur who managed to (gasp!) actually become rich by creatively satisfying the preferences of willing buyers. In an age in which economic advantage is increasingly negotiated for in legislative halls, courtrooms, administrative agencies, and smoke-filled rooms, the prospect of individuals succeeding in the marketplace must be suppressed. What good is our neo-mercantilist system if individuals can have the audacity to freely compete with those who have worked so intently to create and maintain their political connections?

That Supreme Court Justice Anton Scalia could take two expense-paid duck hunting trips with Dick Cheney, at a time when Cheney's case was up before that court, shows how brazenly comfortable the "system" is with cozy corporate-state relationships. That Cheney's former employer, Halliburton, stands to make close to one billion dollars from the Iraqi war and its aftermath, seems to bother only a few individuals. Nor has much criticism been made of ongoing efforts in Washington for various business interests trying to profit from the war in Iraq.

But who is prepared to confront this genuine wrongdoing? Certainly not John Kerry and most of his Democratic colleagues, who support the war — and its counterpart Patriot Act — and have carefully maneuvered to take advantage of 9/11 and the Iraqi war without

questioning the underlying assumptions behind either. Nor are the major media scribblers and squealers — straight out of journalism school, and with no desire to end their careers by raising unwanted questions — who content themselves with "safe" topics.

There is still a latent awareness, even within Boobus's confused and benumbed mind, that the American economic system is somewhat flawed. Having no understanding of marketplace processes, and being interested in nothing more than "bottom line" considerations of costs and gains, Boobus looks upon the marketplace as a kind of magic show, in which results are the product of legerdemain practiced by slippery, scheming people. Such is the confusion expressed by most Americans who are unable to distinguish a market system in which people engage in voluntary transactions by investing their own resources, from a political system in which coercion and despoliation dictate outcomes.

But to make such distinctions is to question the entire political structure of American life, an inquiry most are unwilling to make. It is alleged that Martha lied to investigators. But what of a bloody war, grounded in lies and deception, that has led to the deaths of thousands of innocent people and profited the business interests that have supported it? Will Boobus take on that issue? Not in our time. People who fear the bully look for a convenient scapegoat upon whom to inflict their unfocused anger. What better candidate for punishment than Martha Stewart, not for any wrongdoing in which she has engaged, but as a sacrificial lamb to atone for the wrongs of a system that the cowardly among us are too frightened to challenge.

Some have suggested that what lies behind Martha's problems was her failure to play political games, such as contributing hundreds of thousands of dollars to both political parties as so many other businesses do. Like organized crime syndicates that sell "protection," Martha is being punished, it is said, as an example to others who might dare to do business without political patronage. I don't know if this is true, but I can imagine that, if it were, we might now see Martha not on federal courthouse steps, but at a White House conference with business leaders being shown how to profit from the death and suffering of other human beings. Somehow, though, the image of Martha Stewart advising Baghdad homemakers on redecorating their bombed-out hovels ("you can take your old burkas and convert them into tablecloths, and stencil little American flags around the edges") just doesn't strike me as plausible.

For those who share my contempt for a system that presumes to imprison Martha Stewart while rewarding political wrongdoing, there is one act of peaceful protest that could be mounted. As a believer in the economic influence of boycotts, people could withhold their approval of this decision by purchasing copies of — or even subscribing to — Martha's magazine, Martha Stewart Living. Unlike those in Washington who prefer to keep secrets from you, I will be upfront: I own no stock in any of Martha's enterprises, nor have I any plans to buy any. I do believe, however, that a substantial increase in circulation for her magazine — or any other products or services she sells — would send a healthy vote of "no

confidence" to a corrupt system that dares to question the integrity of others!

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