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CAN GEORGE BUSH STATE, WITH IMPUNITY, THAT ATHEISTS SHOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED EITHER CITIZENS OR PATRIOTS?

The History of the Issue - by Madalyn O'Hair - Reprint of American Atheists booklet from the early 1990s

When George Bush (Senr) was campaigning for the presidency, as incumbent vice president, one of his stops was in Chicago, Illinois, on August 27, 1987. At O'Hare Airport he held a formal outdoor news conference. There Robert I. Sherman, a reporter for the American Atheist news journal, fully accredited by the state of Illinois and by invitation a participating member of the press corps covering the national candidates, had the following exchange with the then Vice President Bush (Senr).

Sherman: What will you do to win the votes of the Americans who are Atheists?

Bush (Senr): I guess I'm pretty weak in the Atheist community. Faith in god is important to me.

Sherman: Surely you recognize the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are Atheists?

Bush (Senr): No, I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

Sherman (somewhat taken aback): Do you support as a sound constitutional principle the separation of state and church?

Bush (Senr): Yes, I support the separation of church and state. I'm just not very high on Atheists.

On October 29, 1988, Mr. Sherman had a confrontation with Ed Murnane, co-chairman of the Bush-Quayle '88 Illinois campaign. This concerned a lawsuit Mr. Sherman had filed to stop the Community Consolidated School District 21 (Chicago, Illinois, suburb) from forcing his first-grade Atheist son to pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States - "one nation under God" (Bush Snr's phrase). The following conversation took place.

Sherman: American Atheists filed the Pledge of Allegiance lawsuit yesterday. Does the Bush campaign have an official response to this filing?

Murnane: It's bullshit.

Sherman: What is bullshit?

Murnane: Everything that American Atheists does, Rob, is bullshit.

Sherman: Thank you for telling me what the official position of the Bush campaign is on this issue.

Murnane: You're welcome.

This suit, now in federal district court for over three years, is not considered to be bullshit by the federal judge before whom it is pending. During the time it has been in the federal court, Robert Sherman's son, now age nine, has been physically and psychologically brutalized in his school for refusing to pledge to a "nation under God."

After Bush's election but before his taking office, American Atheists wrote to Bush asking that he consider being sworn into office on the Constitution instead of the Bible and also asking him to retract his August 1987 statement. Bush had his White House buddy, C. Boyden Gray, counsel to the president, reply on White House stationery on February 21, 1989, stating that substantively Bush stood by his original statement.

As you are aware, the President is a religious man who neither supports atheism nor believes that atheism should be unnecessarily encouraged or supported by the government.

American Atheists had not asked Bush to either "unnecessarily" or even "necessarily" encourage or support them. All they wanted was an apology for the insult.

Many Atheists wrote to Bush over the issue and Nelson Lund, the associate counsel to the president, found it necessary to reply on April 7, 1989, directly to the American Atheist General Headquarters, Inc. This letter from the White House said that Mr. Gray was adhering to his statements in the February 21, 1989, letter.

On May 4, 1989, Jon Murray, the president of American Atheists, again wrote to President Bush demanding a clarification of and an apology for his statement that Atheists "should not be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots." Bush ignored the letter, as did Gray and Lund. Mr. Murray also asked for an appointment so that a group of representatives of American Atheists could meet with Bush.

Mr. Joseph W Hagin II responded on May 25, 1989: again on White House stationery. He stated that the president "appreciated your taking the time to write and your willingness to share your thoughts" but that "due to heavy commitments on his official calendar" the president could not meet with representatives of American Atheists.

On January 9, 1990, George Bush, in signing a proclamation for the Martin Luther King holiday, had the gall to remark that "bigots" must be brought to justice. Again, American Atheists threw his words back in his face, asking what his designation of Atheists as being unworthy of citizenship was.

On February 5, 1990, Mr. Nelson Lund replied - again on White House stationery -- stating

We believe that our position has been adequately explained in previous correspondence.

Indeed it has -- and that position is that George Bush is a bigot.

On February 21, 1990, American Atheists wrote to every member of the United States Congress asking that body to pass a resolution condemning discrimination against Atheists by any elected or appointed official of government. The offered resolution read:

No person in public life may be free to impugn the patriotism of any minority group because of that group's opinion in respect to religion.

President George Bush is herewith censured for his public expression of August 27, 1987, at which time he stated: "I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God."

You don't need to guess how many senators and representatives answered that letter: there were none. At this point, American Atheists sent a list of the members of Congress to all of its membership and asked each one to write or telephone their congressmen. Hundreds of angry letters and telephone calls were received at the American Atheist GHQ during the next several months as it became obvious that the elected Congress was composed entirely of politicians too damn yellow to challenge Bush. In just one campaign incident, American Atheists was able to teach thousands of the nation's top-notch citizens that their government did not give a damn about them. This exercise added appreciably to the malcontentedness in the nation - and rightly so.

American Atheists then sent every single columnist in the United States a packet of information from Pat Buchanan to Jim Fain. Only one was courageous enough to write a lengthy article on the matter: Tom Tiede. And the newspapers in which Tiede was syndicated did print his column taking the president to task. A little later, the CNN feature program "Larry King Live" broadcast a quarter-hour interview with Mr. Robert Sherman, as he detailed the perfidy of President Bush.

When George Bush appeared on the campus of the University of Texas on May 19, 1990, American Atheists placed a full-page advertisement in the Austin American-Statesman detailing the above and demanding an apology and an explanation. The founders of American Atheists, a thirty-year-old organization, are both honorably discharged veterans: Richard F O'Hair, U.S. Marines (totally and permanently disabled); and Madalyn O'Hair, Women's Army Corps. Both served in World War II.

On December 23, 1990, in Chicago, Illinois, Mr. Robert Sherman met with Ed Derwinski, the secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, to discuss exclusion of American Atheists from veterans' groups which have been chartered by the United States Congress. Mr. Derwinski said he would do

"absolutely nothing" about the discrimination.

On January 3, Mr. Sherman crossed paths with Ed Derwinski again at the Illinois inaugurations. He asked Mr. Derwinski, at that time, what American Atheists could do to have the Bush administration take an interest in the problem of discrimination against American Atheist veterans. Mr. Derwinski's response was:

What you should do for me is what you should do for everybody: Believe in God. Get off our backs.

When Mr. Sherman was in Washington, D.C., on another issue on March 20, 1991, he again met with Mr. Derwinski, who, on this occasion, shouted that the Atheists should "get off his back," that the Bush administration would do nothing for them, and that they would need to "sue" to end discrimination against them.

To add pointed insult to injury, the City of Chicago Commission on Human Rights refused to permit American Atheist Veterans to appear as a group in the Fourth of July "Welcome Home" parade for the veterans of Desert Storm in that city.

In the corridors of American history, Atheists have loomed large: Clarence Darrow, Margaret Sanger, Mark Twain, Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Albert Einstein, California's Governor Culbert L. Olson, Thomas Edison, the great botanist Luther Burbank, and James Smithson, founder of the Smithsonian Institution. The list is long.

American Atheists ask that you write to George Bush, President of the United States, at The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. 20500 and ask him for an apology to this group which comprises 9 percent of the population.