

Goose Chase

A heavy-handed drug raid reveals the decay of small-town America.

By Anthony Gancarski

GOOSE CREEK IS ONE of the bigger towns in Berkeley County, S.C., just a few miles up U.S. Highway 52 from Charleston. In the spring, there's a Farmers Market that accepts fresh produce for the Plant-A-Row-For-The-Hungry program to help neighbors in need. This time of year, as the morning air tends toward crispness, on the weekends people hunt deer with shotguns, as often as not with people they've known for decades. Goose Creek is a place where families know families, or at least that's how I remember it from growing up nearby.

It must not be that way anymore. The Goose Creek I remember wouldn't have allowed local police to storm the halls of Stratford High School and order children to the floor at gunpoint so they could conduct a search for anything, even illegal drugs. Officers burst into the 2,700-student facility recently, screaming at pupils to lie face down, before rifling through their bags.

Was it worth it? Twelve backpacks contained what news reports call "residue." No arrests were made. Police based their decision to raid the school on closed-circuit footage that suggested "drug activity"; a spokesman for the local constabulary added that the officers who had drawn their weapons were "not pointing at the faces or heads of the students." Stratford's Principal, George McCrackin, defended the raid by saying "the volume and the amount of marijuana coming into the school is unacceptable."

This wouldn't have happened a couple of decades ago, not in Goose Creek, a predominately white enclave of roughly

30,000 souls. Drugs weren't legal or encouraged anywhere then, of course, but it nonetheless would have been unthinkable for cops to storm a building and stand over the sons and daughters of the people with whom they hunted, fished, and worshipped. It would have been seen as a violation of another man's children and, by proxy, his manhood.

Of course, in this current era, government acting *in loco parentis* has come to be expected. News stories about the plight of underpaid teachers usually include at least one of them grouching about how children aren't raised right at home. And they're correct, of course. As Americans work more hours, and as women spend less time in the home and more time in the workplace, who raises the children? Suffice it to say that the tender mercies of government public schools are a poor substitute for living, breathing, blood-kin role models.

When I was teaching Freshman Composition at the university level, my diagnostic essay assignment (conducted to

The essays submitted by the students, though wildly variant in terms of writing skill, sounded the same bleakly atonal note. A rotund white girl with a big nose and a Philadelphia accent claimed that high school had "infuriated" her day after day, and that she only got through four years by borrowing liberally from her parents' Xanax. A strapping soccer player from Trinidad, who moved to the United States at the age of 14, wrote in painstaking cursive that he had been rebuked by his school district's superintendent for saying he'd prefer reform school to high school—the former struck him as more honest.

And the great irony of the essays' similarities to each other was that these students were all educated in the "It Takes a Village" era. Rather than feeling school was an opportunity to revel in each other's diversity, these students wrote of impenetrable caste systems. Football players wrote of team-bus jokes where a freshman or other newbie was forced to eat feces on a sandwich. Girls' volleyball

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get a writing sample, evidence of style, etc.) focused on what high school was like for the matriculating college freshman. The responses could lead a reasonable person to wonder if public schools are intended primarily to impart necessary knowledge and skill sets, or if they're set up deliberately to socialize children into unthinking followers of orders.

players wrote about coaches taking liberties with them. Assuming that even half of what I received were factual accounts, I can only conclude that public schools taught more social than academic lessons. The great majority of my students claimed never to have read a full book during the 12 years of schooling prior to my class. Instead, they

watched movies in class and learned to write (and think and even pray) in passive voice.

Passive voice is inevitable in the young as they now exist, their language a honking medley of ums, ers, likes, and you knows. They are encouraged to hedge their bets, to do as they are told. Such a tendency has a certain utility, if the ideal human condition is that of an automaton, and if the people issuing directives are beyond corruption or error.

Experience teaches us that no one is beyond either. Not the bus driver in Jacksonville, Fla., contracted through private company First Student, who refused to pick up Muslim middle-school students on her route. Nor her colleague who kicked those same students off her bus for being “too loud.” Yet these drivers, despite proving unworthy of the responsibility, are put in the position of modeling adult behavior to impressionable youngsters twice daily. Charged with that formidable task, the drivers show, yet again, that most people make better role models when not given absolute authority over a situation.

I won my first turkey shoot on a raw, drizzly November night in Goose Creek. Between shots at the target I remember standing with other shooters—retired World War II vets, truck drivers, children with whom I played Pee Wee League Football—warming my hands by a controlled fire flickering orange from within a metal barrel. It’s hard to imagine such a time and a place existed in light of the dispiriting news from venerable Stratford High. Knowing that the Goose Creek situation will only set a precedent for actions like this at other public schools leads me to just one question. What kind of children will be born to people taught that the best way to resolve a social problem is at gunpoint? ■

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“Free-Speech Zone”

The administration quarantines dissent.

By James Bovard

ON DEC. 6, 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft informed the Senate Judiciary Committee, “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty ... your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and ... give ammunition to America’s enemies.” Some commentators feared that Ashcroft’s statement, which was vetted beforehand by top lawyers at the Justice Department, signaled that this White House would take a far more hostile view towards opponents than did recent presidents. And indeed, some Bush administration policies indicate that Ashcroft’s comment was not a mere throwaway line.

When Bush travels around the United States, the Secret Service visits the location ahead of time and orders local police to set up “free speech zones” or “protest zones” where people opposed to Bush policies (and sometimes sign-carrying supporters) are quarantined. These zones routinely succeed in keeping protesters out of presidential sight and outside the view of media covering the event.

When Bush came to the Pittsburgh area on Labor Day 2002, 65-year-old retired steel worker Bill Neel was there to greet him with a sign proclaiming, “The Bush family must surely love the poor, they made so many of us.” The local police, at the Secret Service’s behest, set up a “designated free-speech zone” on a baseball field surrounded by a chain-link fence a third of a mile from the location of Bush’s speech. The police cleared the path of the motorcade of all critical signs, though folks with

pro-Bush signs were permitted to line the president’s path. Neel refused to go to the designated area and was arrested for disorderly conduct; the police also confiscated his sign. Neel later commented, “As far as I’m concerned, the whole country is a free speech zone. If the Bush administration has its way, anyone who criticizes them will be out of sight and out of mind.”

At Neel’s trial, police detective John Ianachione testified that the Secret Service told local police to confine “people that were there making a statement pretty much against the president and his views” in a so-called free speech area. Paul Wolf, one of the top officials in the Allegheny County Police Department, told *Salon* that the Secret Service “come in and do a site survey, and say, ‘Here’s a place where the people can be, and we’d like to have any protesters put in a place that is able to be secured.’” Pennsylvania district judge Shirley Rowe Trkula threw out the disorderly conduct charge against Neel, declaring, “I believe this is America. Whatever happened to ‘I don’t agree with you, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it’?”

Similar suppressions have occurred during Bush visits to Florida. A recent *St. Petersburg Times* editorial noted, “At a Bush rally at Legends Field in 2001, three demonstrators—two of whom were grandmothers—were arrested for holding up small handwritten protest signs outside the designated zone. And last year, seven protesters were arrested when Bush came to a rally at the USF Sun Dome. They had refused to be cor-