

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.



## Mencken and Me

WASHINGTON

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? In the public prints, I have been called a “pipsqueak,” and a “self-important pipsqueak” at that. The scene of the crime is *Forbes* magazine. The felon is Jonathan Yardley, an elderly book critic at the *Washington Post*. Yardley was asked by *Forbes* if any of the “current crop of right-wing pundits” is comparable to H. L. Mencken, the editor and critic best known for his work in the 1920s. I was referred to along with Ann Coulter (who apparently told CNN in 2006 that she is “the right-wing Mencken”), Mark Steyn, and P. J. O’Rourke. Yardley went on to say, “I don’t respect a single one of them, much less think that a single one of them deserves to be compared to H.L.M.”

I have read Yardley for years, often finding him informative though occasionally disingenuous. Certainly his disapproval of “self-importance” is disingenuous. When he hands down his judgments the organ music is rumbling in his head, the incense filling the room—the holy man hath spoken. As for the comparisons of me with Mencken, I would have thought that my appraisal of him seven years back would have disqualified me for further consideration. In *The American Spectator* I reviewed a couple of convincing biographies of “the Sage” and concluded that he was a very amusing, albeit wrong-headed, writer of brilliant prose, who by the 1930s “had become an anti-Semite, a racist, and a reactionary crank.” Yet he was also a fine philologist and editor. *The American Mercury*, which he founded in 1924 with George Jean Nathan and Alfred A. Knopf, was an exhilarating departure from the musty magazines that preceded it, and the *Mercury* allowed him to become America’s first celebrity intellectual.

He was pronounced by the likes of Walter Lippmann and the editors of the *New York Times* a powerful intellectual force. “The most powerful private citizen in the United States,” is how the *Times* put it. Still, after championing a wave of novelists in the 1920s and celebrating the musical masters of the

18th and 19th centuries, he showed no taste for later literary movements and almost no interest in any of the other arts. During years when Eliot, Pound, and Yeats were at work, Mencken dismissed poetry as “beautiful balderdash.”

Despite access to some of the finest minds of his time (he died in 1956, age 75), he missed practically every important historic current swirling around him. Though he claimed great interest in science, there is little evidence that he recognized the wonders on the horizon. He also missed the rise and fall of dictatorship, and dismissed democracy’s challenge to the dictators as demagoguery. Hitler struck him as “a shabby ass” and an Austrian William Jennings Bryan. As he saw it, World War II was “a wholly dishonorable and ignominious business. I believe that that will be history’s verdict upon it.” On large matters he was almost always wrong.

He was a very funny writer until his anti-democratic and anti-religious jokes overwhelmed his other jokes and lost the capacity to make readers laugh. That would be in the 1930s and 1940s. In those days he was largely out of the public eye. He attended to his great study of the American language and to notes and memoirs that did not come out until after his death, in some cases not until the 1980s and 1990s. The writings reveal an angry, often confused, bigot and crank. He did publish three merry volumes of autobiography, but they were so marbled with fictions as to suggest escapism. As was true through much of Mencken’s life, the popular press misperceived him. *Time* described him in 1943 as “[t]he nation’s comical, warm-spirited, outstanding village atheist.” The following year, the “warm-spirited” Sage publicly observed to the interviewer Bob Considine that World War II is “a better state than peace.” American soldiers enjoyed the war. President Roosevelt “will keep this war running at least until the end of his fourth term. He knows that if the war stops, he loses his war powers and his jobs.” That *Time* writer may still be at the magazine today.

As I say, on large matters Yardley’s Sage was almost always wrong. I think the best explanation

for the cruelty of Mencken's private thoughts, his bewilderment late in life, and his frequent misperception of his times is provided by Terry Teachout, the author of a 2002 biography, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken*. Mencken was incapable of perceiving the evil that stalks the world. The Sage, writes Teachout, "had no feeling for the darkness in the heart of man. He looked at evil and saw ignorance. To him Hitler was Babbitt run amok...."

I agree with Yardley. I am no Mencken.

## Now That We've Won

WASHINGTON

STUDENTS OF INTELLIGENCE-GATHERING will tell you that deception and outright lying are essential to the art. Having now reviewed the controversy over who in Congress knew what about the CIA's use of enhanced interrogation techniques, I have concluded that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi might make a superb intelligence officer. She claims that she was utterly unaware of the CIA's rough treatment of terrorists detained after 9/11. She says this without betraying a hint of deception or uncertainty. Well done, well done.

Yet a really good liar does not lie about something easily refuted. In the case of the Hon. Pelosi's protests of ignorance, there are no fewer than three public sources out there refuting her. One is a 2007 *Washington Post* report that she was included in a "bipartisan group" from the Hill that was fully apprised of these interrogation techniques in September 2002. Another refutation comes from CIA director George Tenet's memoir, *At the Center of the Storm*, which is pretty open about how rough treatment cracked Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11 who boasts of beheading journalist Danny Pearl. Tenet also adds that he briefed "senior congressional leaders," presumably among them the Hon. Pelosi, about another of her present concerns, namely, warrantless wiretaps. Then there is former congressman and CIA director Porter Goss's recent revelation in the *Washington Post* that "Today, I am slack-jawed to read that members [of Congress] claim to have not understood that the techniques on which they were briefed were to actually be employed; or that specific techniques such as 'waterboarding' were never mentioned." So maybe the Speaker of the House would not be a very good spy.

If there is any good news to come from the Obama administration's release of CIA documents relating to the detention and interrogation of post-9/11 detainees, it is that Washington's post-9/11 fears of further terrorist attacks against America have abated. It is official that the Obama administration no longer uses the term "Global War on Terror." So maybe the war is over and we can all relax.

Yet there is no question that the release of these documents and the ongoing debate over whether to prosecute government functionaries involved in the Bush administration's treatment of terrorists has hurt our intelligence community both at home and abroad. Intelligence officers within our service have been intimidated by our own government. Foreign intelligence officers who have been sharing intelligence with us abroad are going to be much less forthcoming. It is a good thing that the administration has determined that America is now secure from terrorist threats.

This is not the first time liberal politicians have put the clamps on our intelligence services' ability to protect the country. In 1975 the Church Committee investigated both the CIA and the FBI, with the consequence that congressional oversight committees were set up which in the aftermath of 9/11 were accused of inhibiting our intelligence services from pursuing al Qaeda aggressively in the 1990s. Now, apparently, with the war on terror won, we can go back to those blissful days.

Yet frankly I am uneasy about this new climate here in Washington. Historically intelligence documents have been kept from the public eye, not just here but throughout the Western world. The idea is that we do not want our enemies to be informed of what we know. In David Reynolds's stupendous book on how Winston Churchill wrote his World War II memoir, *In Command of History*, Reynolds shows over and over again Churchill and his opponents in the Labour government cooperating to keep British secrets from the public. British intelligence techniques in particular were not divulged. That President Obama's administration in the first 100 days of its existence would expose the intelligence techniques used by his predecessor strikes me as reckless. Yet, on the other hand, the global war on terror is over, so maybe everything is going to be okay. I do, however, wonder how President Barack Obama managed to win the war so quickly. Was it just a matter of retiring the hellish Bush from the White House, or is there more to it? ❧



## **The Herald (Sharon, Pennsylvania)**

*On the howl page of a great American daily, echoes of the Obama economic plan, also known as the Economics of the Magic Wand:*

Why would anyone be against American taxes being spent on ourselves; isn't this why we pay taxes?

As long as the pork and earmarks mean my tax dollars are spent here in the U.S.A., I don't care what the earmarks are. If it means family breadwinners aren't getting laid off then spend, spend and spend.

When the economy is doing bad give us lots of pork barrel spending. When the economy is good then cut out the pork from the bills and budget.

**(March 10, 2009)**

## **New Republic**

*A carefully researched feuilleton on the friendship and co-conspiracy of former FBI director Louis Freeh and Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, Esq. reveals mysteries of etiquette and gourmandizing that bring back memories of dinner at the London home of Madonna:*

A friendship soon blossomed. Bandar would drop by Freeh's office, where he alone was permitted to smoke cigars. Freeh, in turn, would visit Bandar at his McLean, Virginia compound, which featured a 38-room home and a 12-bedroom dormitory for

staff. On visits to the kingdom, Freeh would dine with the royals. At one dinner in Riyadh, Freeh recalls how "the elegant Saudi ambassador"—that would be Bandar—"reached his well-manicured hand into a roast baby camel's rump, drew out a fistful of meat, and deposited it on my plate—a great honor."

**(May 6, 2009)**

## **The Hill**

*Zoological notes for the solons of Washington, D.C., deposited in the pages of Capitol Hill's newspaper of record:*

Ali Wentworth, actress and wife of ABC's "This Week" host George Stephanopoulos, doesn't hold back.

During her weekly appearance on Oprah's "Friday Live" last week, she revealed that she and George were recently caught having "marital relations" by their 6-year-old daughter, Elliott.

When Elliott asked, "Daddy, what are you doing to Mommy?" Daddy was temporarily speechless, but Wentworth responded brightly, "Daddy's just tickling me."

The subterfuge didn't last, though, because the ABC newsman, who quit his White House spinning job years ago and now uncovers (if that's the right word) the truth, corrected her, saying, "We're making love."

Wentworth has talked frankly about sex on the "Friday Live" show.

Last October she discussed pornography and sex addiction in light of actor David Duchovny's stint in rehab. Wentworth told viewers she's fine with porn, but would not be fine if her husband visited an X-rated Internet chat room. That would be cheating, she claimed.

"I like it," Wentworth said of sex. "I don't love it. I don't need to have it 10 times a day. I'm happier with a Klondike bar sometimes."

**(April 14, 2009)**

## **The Spectator (UK)**

*The editor of the famed British weekly asks minicon David Frum(p) to comment on the state of American conservatism toward the end of the Prophet Obama's first 100 days, and what does he get for his hospitality? More of young David's narcissism:*

I'll make some claims on behalf of the website I edit, a forum for conservative reform and renewal titled NewMajority.com, which has run innovative and courageous pieces by young writers and veteran public servants.

**(April 18, 2009)**

## **Countdown with Keith Olbermann (MSNBC)**

*A Miss Janeane Garofalo, possibly a historian on the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley, puts the recent tax protesters in historic perspective while making Mr. Keith Olbermann's knees knock:*

"Let's be very honest about what this is about. It's not about bashing Democrats. It's not about taxes. They have no idea what the Boston tea party was about. They don't know their history at all. This is about hating a black man in the White House. This is racism

### **Got Your Own?**

Submit your own Current Wisdom at  
currentwisdom@spectator.org or send it to us here:  
Attn: Department of Current Wisdom, 1611 N. Kent Street, Suite 901,  
Arlington, VA 22209 • Fax: (703) 807-2013