

Church Arson Mania

by Mark Tooley

A recent report by the federally appointed National Church Arson Task Force has confirmed that there never was any evidence of an upsurge in racist, fiery attacks upon black churches, despite the media spotlight of last year. The report told us little that is actually new. Insurance statistics showing that 500-600 churches suffer arson every year were largely ignored, and no comprehensive data ever indicated that black churches were any more vulnerable to attack than white churches.

Still, the federal report was greeted with headlines expressing surprise. For most Americans, it was news that the task force had found no evidence of a racist plot, found that more white churches than black churches were suffering arson, found no evidence that racism had motivated more than a small minority of arsonists, and found that only two or three out of 199 suspects so far arrested for church arson have had ties to white supremacist groups.

Actually, the chief originator of the church arson mania, the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), has admitted that white churches were burning at *five times* the rate of black churches. According to the National Council of Churches (NCC), which was the CDR's chief partner in pushing church burnings as a media event, 20 percent of America's churches are black.

Despite this admission, and despite the federal task force's findings, the church arson lobby continues to fulminate. In June, at a NCC-sponsored convocation in Washington called "No More Burnings, No More Hate," speakers repeated the NCC's and the CDR's usual inflammatory rhetoric. They were preparing for "Phase II" of the NCC's Burned Churches Project, which will go beyond church reconstruction to focus on eliminating the "root causes" of racism.

Featured speaker Jesse Jackson blasted conservatives for their stances on welfare reform and affirmative action, chided President Clinton for supporting government downsizing, faulted the media for losing interest in church arson, criticized black preachers who focus on salvation to

the exclusion of politics, and mocked the racial reconciliation efforts of the evangelical Promise Keepers movement. "The right-wing church supported slave laws and segregation laws," thundered Jackson, as he slammed conservative Christians as especially prone to racism. That evangelicals formed the backbone of the Abolitionist movement he seemed not to recall. He warned of a "right-wing" theology that threatens to infect both white and black churches, and ignores the liberal social action that Jackson believes is mandatory for the church.

The NCC said it will work closely with Reverend Jackson on its "Phase II" activities, which will proceed in part thanks to the generosity of the former "Queen of Mean," Leona Helmsley, who has donated \$1 million to the NCC's Burned Churches Fund. Having raised over \$11 million in total, the NCC and the CDR have little reason to admit that their claims about church arson as an emblem of surging American racism have not withstood close scrutiny.

At the Washington convocation, a defiant CDR spokesperson condemned the work of the National Church Arson Task Force, declaring that its report had "sabotaged" the CDR's racial justice effort. Just a few months ago, the CDR released its own report purporting to prove a nationwide conspiracy against black churches, orchestrated by white supremacist groups.

"We'll continue to work with you," said the CDR's Rose Johnson to the federal task force. "But we don't have to buy or believe anything you say. We're not going to accept that." Meanwhile, NCC general secretary Joan Brown Campbell insisted that most white churches that have burned are actually "racially mixed." She explained, "That seems to incite as much as anything else."

Race and racism are fixations for the religious left, for whom sin is nearly always societal (racism, corporate greed, militarism) and rarely personal (adultery, intoxication, envy). While attending the "No More Burnings, No More Hate" conference, I found more theological and ethical sophistication among some of the pastors of burned churches who were there as guests of the NCC. A white Pentecostal pastor from Iowa, for example, told me that his church had been burned by a drug addict, who was upset over his Christian girlfriend's attachment to the church. Because the nearly all-white church conducts an His-

panic ministry, the NCC had classified his church as a potential victim of racism. The NCC loaned a trailer for Sunday School classes, but the church received cash support from the Christian Coalition, Promise Keepers, and the National Association of Evangelicals. The pastor said he did not entirely agree with the political agenda of the NCC and wished there were more emphasis on local church ministry.

A black pastor from Mississippi told me his church had burned and that the police found no evidence of arson, but he was still suspicious. Some local churches had been supportive, but the local newspaper had nearly ignored the burning. At a special service of reconciliation at the church, the town's mayor showed up intoxicated and berated the congregation for the volume of its music.

President Clinton, probably realizing that the church arson hype is now exhausted, declined the NCC's invitation to address its Washington meeting. We can only hope that the country has learned its lesson and will decline the next invitation to join the religious left's crusade against phantom threats.

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LANGUAGE

The Latest Dope From Washington

by Frank Ruddy

Tarry not, I pray you, Madam," Walter Raleigh is supposed to have cautioned Queen Elizabeth, "for the wings of time are tipped with the feathers of death." As Harold Macmillan observed a few years ago: "Civil servants don't write memos like that anymore." Some have trouble just speaking the language. Nicholas Burns, the State Department spokesman and Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, said at a recent press conference that Madeleine Albright's religion was "a personal matter *for she and her family*." Ouch!

Burns is not alone, of course, but to

paraphrase Winston Churchill, infinite is the debt owed to those who want to speak strongly but do not know how. "Literally" is a case in point. Stephanie Fawcett of the National Archives said that thanks to the recently declassified material on the Cuban missile crisis, "You are *literally* a fly on the wall in the White House." Ohio Representative Jim Traficant said by dumping tomatoes on the American market, "Mexico is *literally* throwing tomatoes at Uncle Sam." We know what they mean, of course, but *literally* turns us into real flies, like Jeff Goldblum, and Mexico into a giant Fernando Valenzuela bouncing real tomatoes off a real Uncle Sam.

Washington lawyer/writer Bruce Fein reported that no one could read Armand Valladares' book about life in Cuban prisons "without feeling *nauseous*." Valladares' jailer, Fidel, may be *nauseous* (i.e., causing nausea), but Valladares' readers were *nauseated*, made ill.

A recent episode of television's *The Simpsons* makes a point Washington insiders should note: "Proactive and paradigm; aren't they words dumb people use to sound smart?" George Orwell could not have said it better. New words occur when the old ones have become too vague: *e-mail*, *voice mail*, as distinguished from *snail mail*, for example. But has leftist jargon so infiltrated our language that even the staunchly conservative Congresswoman Ileana Ros-

Lehtinen must use "proactive," as she did in a recent article, just to show that she is not a reactionary? I hope not. "Paradigm," on the other hand, is a real word to describe things like the conjugations of verbs and declensions of nouns. Thomas Kuhn appropriated the term to describe the state of scientific knowledge at a given time, until a new paradigm replaces it. Nevertheless, it is what Westbrook Pegler called an "out-of-town word," and paradigm-users, like sociologists who use mathematical-looking formulas with Greek letters to conceal simplistic notions, should raise eyebrows.

"Parameter" is another suspect word. When my computer advises me: "No such *parameter*, Humanoid," it is using the word correctly to say that I have given the wrong characteristics of whatever I am looking for. Even the late Malcolm Baldrige, the formidable former Secretary of Commerce, nodded on this one. In the wonderful little memo he sent around Washington pleading for plain English, he excommunicated *parameter* and suggested that *boundary* or *limit* be used instead. Oh, the horror!

"Begging the question" is becoming the highfalutin equivalent of "prompts" or "raises the question." Washington talking-head Jim Glassman always misuses it in this way on his *Sunday Capital Gang* show. "Begging the question" is a literal translation from Latin of a lawyer's trick: pretending something that has to be proved has already been proved. When former Secretary of State James Baker, writing in the *New York Times*, defended the Chemical Weapons Treaty against charges that it would undermine national security, Baker argued that "the idea that Ronald Reagan and George Bush would negotiate a treaty detrimental to this nation's security was grotesque." Baker was "begging the question" whether the treaty was safe to ratify by recasting it as whether presidents Reagan and Bush would sell out the country, as if the answer to that question resolved all doubts about the treaty itself.

Archaic expressions are especially attractive to the chattering class and potential "petards." In opposing various religious groups who were calling for federal intervention to protect a church from a Texas zoning law, Washington public television personality Bonnie Erbe wrote: "This legal claim hoists the religious conservatives by their own fatuous *petard*." "Petard" is an old French

word for a bomb. "Hoist" in this context means being blown up by a bomb you yourself set, as happened when sappers dallied. "Fatuous" means silly or foolish. If I ever have to defuse a petard, I hope it is a fatuous one.

The Spanish writer Ortega y Gasset observed that it is a characteristic of our time that the commonplace has the assurance to impose itself wherever it will, crushing traditions of excellence and professionalism. He might have added that it's good for a few yuks, too. The Associated Press announced that a 1997 New Hampshire law imposes jail terms "for hunters who shoot someone while drunk." Sober people are apparently still fair game. Even the *Writer's Digest School*, which is in the business of knowing better, entices new students with "free gifts." A gift by definition is free. A British journalist reported that the Oxford and Cambridge Club was admitting women because the student bodies of both universities were now "almost entirely bi-sexual." (I suspected as much when I was at Cambridge, but now the secret is out.)

For most of this century, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, written by H.W. Fowler and later edited by Sir Ernest Gowers, has been a conspicuous exception to the mediocrity Ortega y Gasset lamented. Fowler's was the *arbiter elegantiae* of English usage and the bane of ugly and barbarous language. No more. Under the new editor, Robert Burchfield, Fowler's passion for proper English, like Fowler himself, has been eliminated from all but the title. As is appropriate for a politically correct age, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage: Third Edition* does not concern itself with how English *should* be spoken but rather how it *is* spoken, by everybody from comic strip characters to rappers. It is not a guide. It is a Sears word catalogue. Just pick out what you want.

Dizzy Dean—who used to say things like, "He slud into third," when he was broadcasting games for the St. Louis Cardinals—got in hot water with local English teachers. Dizzy had the grace to say, "I'll have to quit broadcasting if I have to talk proper." Today it is just the reverse. If Dizzy had stuck around a little longer, he might have been the spokesman for the State Department.

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LIBERAL ARTS

THE COMPASSION POLICE

"A wide range of predators victimize illegal immigrants. Guides and organized gangsters have robbed, raped, and killed them or forced them to work in sweatshops or prostitution rings to pay off the cost of the trip. . . . Xenophobes and hatemongers terrorize them. . . . The fact that illegal immigration is a crime makes the immigrants particularly vulnerable because they are unlikely to seek the protection of the law."

—from the June 1997
National Institute of Justice Journal,
a publication of the
U.S. Department of Justice