



Back Talk *By Susan J. Douglas*

The Immoral Majority

The religious right wants to include moral values in the debate over how our taxes are spent? Bring it on.

BACK IN THE LATE '70S, THE REPUBLICANS learned that if you hailed people as "taxpayers" rather than citizens, and appealed to their meaner instincts, you could convince many that they were downright righteous to withhold their money from supporting the common good.

Why should hard-working, responsible people who never themselves got a "hand-out"—as the line went—see their hard-earned dollars spent on child welfare, public schools or, worst of all, abortions for women who could not afford them? With this last gambit, the Republicans launched on their long and successful campaign to insist that the spending of Americans' tax dollars pass a morality litmus test.

So it is hardly surprising that Congress's avatar of virtue, Tom DeLay, was adamant that Americans consider embryonic stem cell research "immoral," and therefore feel that it is "morally indefensible" to use their tax dollars to support this research. The usual phalanx of smooth-faced, Ken-doll-coiffed evangelicals blanketed the airwaves with this same mantra: Taxpayers would be morally outraged to have their money spent to "destroy life."

They are, well, dead wrong. Polls vary, but approval for stem cell research has actually increased over the past five years, and approval goes up the more poll respondents know about the issue. Last summer, a Harris poll showed 73 percent of Americans supporting stem cell research, and a Pew Center poll in May showed 65 percent support among those who had "heard a lot" about the issue. Even 45 percent of Republicans support the research.

But I find myself warming up to this taxes and morality equation; the Democrats should steal it immediately. And the savings would be enormous: If those of us in the true moral majority withheld our tax dollars from spending that we find immoral, the deficit would shrivel up.

For example, a recent CNN poll found that 57 percent of Americans said it had not been worth going to war in Iraq, an increase since January. Many of us feel that it is highly immoral to have spent at least \$180 billion to terminate the lives of 1,700 U.S. soldiers and probably more than 100,000 Iraqis, and to further destroy the lives of thousands of our soldiers who have returned home horribly maimed and injured. Carrie Gordon Earll of the right-wing Focus on the Family asserted in her opposition to stem cell research, "Federal dollars should not be used to destroy young humans."

Hey Carrie, Amen. It is morally indefensible that our tax dollars have supported the elimination of electricity, water, jobs, health care and basic safety of thousands of Iraqis. This moral outrage must stop.

Millions of us—at least twice as many more than the "culture of life" zealots who are against stem cell research—oppose the death penalty. Again, various polls show support declining—46 percent favor life without parole versus execution. And talk about squandering our tax dollars immorally: One estimate put the cost of New York's death penalty (reinstated in 1995) at \$160 million, or \$23 million per person sentenced to death. A Tennessee study estimated that death penalty trials cost 48 percent more than trials seeking life imprisonment. In other words, the death penalty is a wasteful government program.

How about the morality of giving tax cuts to millionaires while 11 million kids have no health insurance? While the Democrats have been terrified to take on the Bush tax cuts, polls show that 54 percent of Americans feel the federal tax cuts have not been worth it because they have increased the deficit and caused cuts in federal programs. Your and my taxes go to paying a whopping \$317 billion in interest on the national debt. Note to Democrats: These tax cuts are morally indefensible. Say so.

Do the "culture of life" people feel it is moral to despoil the land and then make taxpayers clean it up? Team Bush is now allowing mining companies to dump toxic waste on public lands without liability. According to *The Progress Report*, "More toxic waste is produced by hard rock mining than any other industry in America." Who pays for clean up? You and I—our tax dollars at work.

And finally, while Donald "I-know-no-shame" Rumsfeld called the Amnesty International report condemning conditions at Guantánamo "reprehensible," what is truly reprehensible is that our tax dollars support the ongoing incarceration, humiliation and torture of detainees there. The usually spineless Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) has belatedly called for Gitmo to be shut down, but not on moral grounds. Yet millions of us are sickened and mortified that these practices are conducted in our name.

The religious right wants to talk moral values and taxes? Let's bring it on. Every time Team Bush and their flock want to fund more wars, torture, economic inequality and environmental ruin—all of which terminate life—they should hear one phrase back right away: morally indefensible. ■

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So Very Sorry

OCCASIONALLY I SPEAK PUBLICLY ABOUT THE racial disparities that afflict the prison-industrial complex. I often end my talks with an observation about how racial lynching once was accepted by white Americans because they assumed that the mostly black male victims were guilty.

African Americans had been so thoroughly demonized by the media of those days many whites considered lynching a public service. We marvel at our former acceptance of such racist injustice. But in the future we'll look back on our current apartheid system of criminal justice and shake our heads in disbelief.

I thought about this when the Senate passed a voice vote apology for its inaction in the face of a documented 4,743 lynchings from 1882 to 1968. Most of those mob murders were of black men in the South.

During that period about 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress. Although three bills passed the House, the Senate, dominated by filibustering Dixiecrats, always said no.

On June 13, the Senate passed a non-binding resolution, sponsored by Senators Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and George Allen, (R-Va.), that apologized to the victims and survivors for its failure to act.

The measure "expresses the deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets of the Senate to the descendants of victims of lynching, the ancestors of whom were deprived of life, human dignity and the constitutional protections accorded all citizens of the United States." The resolution also "remembers the history of lynching to ensure that these tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated."

Both Landrieu and Allen requested a vote by official roll call. But Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) insisted on a voice vote, which allowed senators to avoid recording their position on the measure. Senators could add their names as co-sponsors, however, and 90 of 100 signed on.

Both senators from the state with the highest number of lynchings (Mississippi) were among those withholding their signatures, as well as senators from New Hampshire and Wyoming.

Expressing public regret for complicity in well-documented cases of domestic terrorism apparently was too risky for the 10 Republican senators who refused to sign as co-sponsors. Many of these same senators are among Congress' fiercest opponents of Islamist terrorism.

While they refused to endorse an apology for abetting racist violence, several of the unsigned senators

also were prominent in later forcing Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin to apologize for inviting comparisons between abusive treatment of suspected terrorists at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the treatment accorded victims of Nazi camps and Soviet gulags.

Had Durbin sought a more cogent comparison between the United States and totalitarian gulags, he could have cited Pelican Bay State Prison in California and made the same point. The United States hosts 6 percent of the world's population and 25 percent of its prisoners; this nation's prison-industrial complex is the new gulag.

What's more, the racist impulse that impelled white hate mobs to lynch black suspects is still recognizable in America's apartheid gulags. Although black men are about 6 percent of the U.S. population they make up about half of the nation's prisoners. Study after study has provided statistics that confirm how racial injustices corrupt and corrode the criminal justice system, yet denial persists.

Some of this denial is being camouflaged by a seeming readiness to atone for the anti-black violence of our nation's racist past. In recent years, some of the most egregious crimes committed during the turbulent period of the civil rights struggle have been re-examined and in some cases, resolved.

Byron de la Beckwith was convicted in 1994 for the sniper murder of Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers; in 2002 Bobby Frank Cherry was convicted for killing four black girls in the infamous 1963 bombing of a church in Birmingham, Ala.

On June 21, a jury convicted Edgar Ray Killen of manslaughter in the 1964 murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in Philadelphia, Miss., and the FBI exhumed the body of Emmett Till in hopes of finding clues to the brutal 1955 murder of the 14-year-old for reportedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Miss.

This new thrust for retroactive racial justice is also, I suspect, a muted reaction to African Americans' increasing push for reparations. The logic of reparations—that historical wounds worsen unless repaired or redressed—is apparent in many of these contemporary efforts.

But even supportive senators seem oblivious to the connection between our past of anti-black brutality and the racial disparities of today's criminal justice system. And although the resolution wanly concedes Senate complicity in mob murders, it does little to compensate victims of a racist terrorism that was culture-deep. ■

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