

The Great Enemy of the Truth

Presented to the

ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

Hopkinsville, KY

Marvin D. Denison

February 2, 2012

Quote:

For the great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie-deliberate, contrived, and dishonest-but the myth-persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

For a few minutes this evening let's agree to dispense with comfortable opinion and deal with "inconvenient truths" of another sort. This is an undeniably political year. Yet, we are forbidden to address politics tonight. These ramblings must be masked in the cloak of history and settled outcomes-although neither is rarely ever successfully cloaked or settled.

First...as has been repeated countless times of late, personal partisan political attacks during and after campaigns are nothing new. The level of nastiness this year will probably pale in comparison to the familiar charges against Andrew Jackson or Jackson's harshness toward John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. For those in need of a refresher course, a quick check with the facts. In 1824 Jackson received 153,000 popular votes to J.Q. Adams' 109,000, failed to get a majority of the electoral college, and lost when the House of Representatives had to decide the contest. After spending four years damning the President at every possible opportunity, "Old Hickory" won a clear majority in 1828 and in another four-man race for reelection in 1832. We could spend some time dealing with the

charges and counter-charges relating to the corrupt bargain between Clay and Adams, but I would have us consider the great Church vs. state debate of the 1820s-yes, you heard me correctly-the delivery of mail on Sunday.

On the fourth of July in 1827, the Reverend Ezra Stiles Ely of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and a long time friend of Andrew Jackson spoke of his idea.

I propose, fellow-citizens, a new sort of union, or, if you please, a Christian party in politics.

If Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Episcopalians would unite on Election Day they *could govern every public election in our country.*

One of the major problems, concluded a convention in May of 1828 forming the General Union for promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath, was transporting mail on Sunday. By 1828, however, with national religious consciousness growing, local religious leaders began to complain that **post offices, which doubled as gathering places in small towns, were diverting the faithful from attending church on Sunday.** Committees were formed in both the North and the South to demand that mail on Sundays be stopped.

The controversy grew to the point that the Senate Committee on the Post Office was forced to deal with the question, chaired by Richard M. Johnson. Yes, that's Ky's Richard Johnson -hero of the battle of the Thames during the War of 1812. Senator Johnson of Jefferson County had a lengthy and varied career after his education at Transylvania University in Lexington. He had been in congress for much of the decades of the 18 teens and twenties serving both in the House and Senate and during much of that time as chairman of the Committee on the Post Office. Faced with this groundswell of petitions on the sacred nature of the Sabbath, his committees issued two reports in 1829 and 1830.

“It is not the legitimate province of the legislature to determine what religion is true, or what false.”

“Our Government is a civil, and not a religious institution.”

For all his trouble with the evangelical sects in Ky, Johnson's reelection to the Senate was denied and the legislature chose George Mortimer Bibb. Yet, Johnson was returned to the House by popular vote and again took up the hot topic of Sunday deliveries along with a consistent and vigorous attack on debtor's prisons and squatter's rights to public lands in the west.

Johnson really hoped his efforts would bring him the VP nomination of 1832 but failing in that, he found himself in the 1836 election in a four-man race for Vice President. Although he was the clear favorite, the Electoral College vote produced no winner and for the first and only time the

Senate had to elect the the Vice President. VP Johnson thereby created another distinction for Kentucky!

I've gone into Johnson's electoral troubles only to get to quote my favorite couplet in these early nineteenth century political campaigns.

*Rumpsey-Dumpsey, Rumpsey-Dumpsey,
Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh*

No doubt a rich source of yet another paper!

Second...4,487 dead in nine years (8 times that many killed in less that 36 hours in a field in southern Pennsylvania with mid-nineteenth century technology). Have we begun to reach the “casualties free war” of science fiction? Whenever the subject of drones and remote control pilots comes up, I'm reminded of an old *Star Trek* episode where computers “fought” and the designated dead simply queued up to an all-too-real vaporizing machine-no mess, no fuss, and no reason to end it. We still have real damage, but have managed to make all the destruction land on someone else's doorstep. Only two real instances of property destruction to our homeland that resulted in retaliation exist since the dawn of the 20th century. Only Pearl Harbor actually caused a constitutional declaration of war. Despite what Ron Paul would lead us to practice, this whole business of “declaring” war is apparently now a vestige of bygone formality. We have had no problem at all in making all sorts of war without even a nod to what the Constitution says is required. Paul may indeed

have a valid point! Apparently, however a large number of Republican folk have other agendas, but Ron continues to make his libertarian points to smaller and smaller audiences.

Were it not for the proximity of Ft. Campbell we could have virtually escaped any impact of this longest war-as did most of the country and shopped our way through those dreadful months after 9/11. Had only the shaping of our response required the FULL involvement of the American people with something other than watching the infamous debt clock tick.

Since this is the era of full disclosure, I'm at the back end of the Vietnam generation-I was subject to one the one of the last lottery draft years.

My undergraduate deferment expired on graduation in May-the SS authority to draft expired in June. I went on to graduate school as our involvement in Vietnam and the Nixon Presidency both wound down.

My lottery number was 172-had I not been deferred the draft would have not reached me in any event, only reaching number 125 during my required year of inclusion.

Third...

In my now 30+ years of dealing with high school students and attempting to teach history and government, several observations have become more and more obvious. The clichés about declining attention spans and unfocused students are essentially over reported and under analyzed.

Unfortunately, the premise of much of modern educational theory is simply wrong. The world is not Lake Woebegone-to require all students to succeed by a date certain on a standardized measure is so absurd as to be laughable if it weren't law. It probably should be laughed about except we are spending enormous amounts of public money to achieve the impossible and serious intelligent adults buy into the rationale of such thinking simply because they feel there is no choice while all the time privately recognizing the absurdity of their tasks.

Now, this is not a plea for non-public options-that's another speech-however, it is obvious that more and more people are simply voting with their feet and abandoning the whole notion of free public education. Let me be clear-we need a successful public education system-from pre-k to graduate school. But, that system should be operated from a realistic set of objectives-not unreachable targets that force otherwise honorable people to do dishonorable things simply to survive in the system.

Today's technology allows instant closing of vast distances and equally instant transmission of virtually everything, be it text, video, altered photos, rumors, innuendo, or cash---worldwide. I now can sit in my living room recliner with my trusty MacBook and see and talk with our son from the Apple Store in Sydney-often with very good video quality and practically no transmission delays. This is marvelous technology and I embrace it and would be in many ways lost without it. However, requiring political leaders or candidates to fill that 24/7 void with intelligent and thoughtful

responses to some action or statement from adversaries or political opponents without the filter of time is not serving them or us well.

It's not just knowing the President of Ubeckistan-stan-stan-stan. It's the whole idea that everything is constantly "on the record" of someone-often everyone-constantly and with the singular purpose of looking for error and then creating error if none can be found in the allotted 30-second time limit.

I am still amazed and riled over how our Republican judge/executive of Trigg county was set up and made to look foolish by Fox news a couple of years ago over the cost of the bridges to be built to widen highways 68/80 at the LBL and how smug the so-called journalist laughed after his straw-man was successfully knocked down.

When someone in another time zone is forced to deal with a statement before having time to reflect or even hear or read the entirety of the charge or accusation and made to look "weak" or unprepared if they try to wait even one day before responding, we are not well-served.

Lastly...(notice how a fourth point gets sneaked in under the "cloak" of a conclusion) using history to predict the future is always risky and those who insist forever aggravate me, "history shows... or history proves..... Here are a couple of historical truths just to stimulate your cobbler's

digestion. Democratic Presidents have only met reelection defeat one time since Grover Cleveland and Grover came back after a four year enforced vacation. Polling ain't what it used to be. George Gallup has taken his art form high tech. It's now easy to get extremely reliable data on virtually any question. Then, there is that great 1948 Truman-Dewey poll. Gallup's mistake was to quit polling two weeks before the election with fourteen percent of the electorate still undecided.

It ain't over until it's over-but this paper is, except for the quote at the beginning. I will accept guesses during the comments--no fair looking it up on your smart phones in the comfort break!

I thank you for your indulgence and attention.

Sources:

Beginning quote: Yale University Commencement (June 11, 1962) John F. Kennedy

The Age of Jackson, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Kentucky & the Second American Revolution, James Hammack, Jr.