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Tales From the Goofie Left: Michael Lerner

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 8, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

If it be true of public men that they have a moral obligation to be intelligent, this is an obligation Michael Lerner has spent a career ignoring. Lerner is the rabbi-editor of the magazine Tikkun, who published an article in the Washington Post [1]this past weekend arguing that the way to stiffen President Obama?s spine and move him further to the left is for progressives to find and fund a primary challenger. This, we are told, will actually save the Obama presidency by giving it a direction Lerner thinks it now lacks.

The stupidity of this ?solution? to the perceived ?problem? is laughable. Perhaps Lerner is forgetful of recent presidential campaign history, but only three presidents have lost their re-election bids in the past fifty years: Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George H. W. Bush in 1992. Ford was challenged for the GOP nod by Ronald Reagan, Carter was challenged for the Democratic nomination by Sen. Ted Kennedy and Bush was challenged by conservative populist Pat Buchanan. In a sense, of course, LBJ?s decision not to run in 1968 was also a direct result of the primary challenge he faces from Sen. Gene McCarthy. Conversely, Reagan in 1984, Clinton in 1996 and George W. Bush in 2004, did not face a primary challenge and all three went on to win their re-election bids. So, if history is any guide, the fastest way to hand the White House to the Republicans is to follow Lerner?s advice and mount an intra-party challenge to Obama?s re-election.

The study of history, of course, requires a certain discipline and discipline is another aptitude Lerner has failed to master. If you doubt this, go to the website of his magazine and read the section marked ?core vision [2].? Now, mind you, magazines traffic not only in ideas but in words. It is a favor to the reader to have a certain order to one?s articles, a logical progression of ideas with evidence. (I confess, on some mornings, depending on the quality and length of my slumber, my posts fail this standard, too, but I am not bi-monthly!) Take a moment and check out the Tikkun website. This is literary dysentery.

Lerner first landed on my radar screen when his book ?The Politics of Meaning? came out and subsequently formed the basis of a speech by then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Essentially, Lerner argued that government needed to shape and bestow a proper moral sense to its citizenry, to provide structures and education that would give meaning to human lives, and that all this was somehow related to his understanding of biblical texts. The argument is a shocking one at every level. In the century in which Lerner?s tome was written, such over-arching claims for the role of government in the lives of individuals had only been advanced by totalitarians. Even the genodical nationalism of the Serbs, ugly and evil though it was and which was contemporaneous with Lerner?s book, that nationalism was not understood as something the government bestowed so much as it was something the government advanced. At the time of the book?s release, there was a brilliant takedown of its claims by my friend Peter Berkowitz which was published in the Jerusalem Post and which you can read here [3].

Lerner?s current essay is filled with a similar lack of regard for the implications of his suggestions, a kind of brazen, determined dumbness that is mind-boggling. The ?basic platform? for a candidacy challenging Obama from the left includes such unlikely items as an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan, a strong tax on carbon emissions, and ?prosecution of government employees involved in torture or cover-ups to justify the invasion of

Iraq.? Maybe Lerner did notice, but not only do progressives lack the votes for such programs, the idea of an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan is irresponsible both the demands of national security and to those brave Afghanis who have tried to educate girls, denounce corruption, and otherwise take on the Taliban and its 12th century mores. My favorite item on Lerner?s checklist? His demand for ?corporations to prove every five years to a jury of ordinary citizens that they have a satisfactory history of environmental responsibility.? Geez, why didn?t I think of that!

It is unconscionable that the Washington Post gave an inch of ink to this crackpot. Sadly, Lerner is precisely the kind of person whispering into the ears of the liberal faux-intelligentsia who, in turn, are calling for the President?s scalp. Much of this year I have been arguing that responsible Republicans must resist their crazies on the right and Democrats need to do the same with people like Lerner. I am sure the comparison offends both Lerner and the Tea Party, but consider this. He writes of his project, ?Such a candidacy would be pooh-poohed by the media, but if it gathered enough popular support?.? Does that sound like a certain Mama Grizzly to you?

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