

Theocracy Alert

Lurching toward theocracy

By Bill Berkowitz

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"No people ever recognize their dictator in advance. He never stands for election on the platform of dictatorship. He always represents himself as the instrument [of] the Incorporated National Will. ... When our dictator turns up you can depend on it that he will be one of the boys, and he will stand for everything traditionally American. And nobody will ever say 'Heil' to him, nor will they call him 'Fuhrer' or 'Duce.' But they will greet him with one great big, universal, democratic, sheeplike bleat of 'O.K., Chief! Fix it like you wanna, Chief! Oh Kaaaay!'" -- Dorothy Thompson, 1935

"What happened here was the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information which the people could not understand, or so dangerous that, even if the people could understand it, it could not be released because of national security...". -- *They Thought They Were Free*, Milton Mayer, 1955

"Whoooo could imagine, that they would freak out, in Kansas, Kansas, badoobie-doobie-do, Kansas, Kansas..." -- *Help I'm A Rock*, The Mothers of Invention, 1966

"... STOP groups like the ACLU from removing all mentions of Christmas from the public square!" -- Christian Response e-Alert, December 2004

April 5, 2005 ([WorkingForChange](#))—On November 7, 1938, Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew, assassinated Ernst von Rath, a low-ranking German official, at his embassy in Paris. Two days later, Kristallnacht ("Night of Crystal"), a pogrom that destroyed synagogues, Jewish-owned homes, stores and community centers, commenced.

Kristallnacht was incited by a well-organized "intense campaign against Jews [which] began on German National Radio," Milton Mayer wrote in his 1955 book *They Thought They Were Free*. Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi regime's Propaganda Minister, directed the campaign that appeared to move ordinary Germans to action against Jews: Are the German people going to be "sitting ducks all over the world for Jew murderers?" the radio voice challenged. "Are the German people to stand helpless while the Fuhrer's representatives are shot down by the Jew swine? Are the Schweinehunde to get off scott free? Is the wrath of the German People against the Israelite scum to be restrained any longer?"

Ten years after World War II, Milton Mayer went to Germany, where he spent a year searching to find out how ordinary Germans -- not Nazi Party leaders -- seamlessly and somewhat comfortably accepted and embraced fascism.

In a television interview in 1986 -- nearly fifty years after Kristallnacht -- Frank Zappa, a rock musician and free speech advocate, warned that America itself was headed "toward a fascist theocracy."

Only a few months ago, right wing Christian fundamentalists were claiming that Christmas -- and therefore Christians -- was under attack. They vowed that they were not going to take it any more.

Milton Mayer's year-long pilgrimage to Germany and his conversation with "ordinary Germans, Frank Zappa's warning on CNN's *Crossfire* and the Christian right's campaign against church/state separationists makes for an unusual trifecta. Yet these disparate threads of the past and present represent clear trends in America's political landscape as George W. Bush settles in to his second term.

Creeping Toward Fascism

In an article entitled "The Myth of National Victimhood - All Wrapped and Delivered for Christmas," Thom Hartmann looked at the right's argument that liberals were "out to destroy Christmas": "Cobbling together a few anecdotes... they [the Christian right] managed to imply a vast anti-Christian conspiracy bubbling just under the belly of America, and pushed that frightening implication into the minds of millions of Americans just in time for the holiday season," writes Hartmann, a radio talk show host and the author of several books including, "Unequal Protection," "We The People," and "What Would Jefferson Do?"

To understand the gestalt of this claim, Hartmann turned to Milton Mayer and *They Thought They Were Free; The Germans, 1933-45* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). Mayer, an author and journalist and an American Jew of German descent, went to Germany looking for the "average German." He never found the "average German"; instead, he "found ten Germans sufficiently different from one another in background, character, intellect, and temperament to represent, among them, some millions or tens of millions of Germans and sufficiently like unto one another to have been Nazis."

His "ten Nazi friends" were "a marvelous mixture of good and bad impulses, their lives a marvelous mixture of good and bad acts." They were the "little men" who supported, in one way or another, Hitler's Nazism. If the "little men" were seduced into becoming Nazis because their lives were indeed improved, what about the intellectuals who presumably knew better?

Mayer quotes a colleague:

"This separation of government from people, this widening of the gap, took place so gradually and so insensibly, each step disguised (perhaps not even intentionally) as a temporary emergency measure or associated with true patriotic allegiance or with real social purposes. And all the crises and reforms (real reforms, too) so occupied the people that they did not see the slow motion underneath, of the whole process of government growing remoter and remoter. ... "

"To live in this process is absolutely not to be able to notice it... unless one has a much greater degree of political awareness, acuity, than most of us had ever had occasion to develop. Each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion, 'regretted,' that, unless one were detached from the whole process from the beginning, unless one understood what the whole thing was in principle, what all these 'little measures' that no 'patriotic Germans' could resent must some day lead to, one no more saw it developing from day to day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head.

"In this conversation," Thom Hartmann wrote, "Mayer's friend suggests that he wasn't making an excuse for not resisting the rise of fascism, but simply pointing out an undisputable reality. This, he suggests, is how fascism will always take over a nation."

"Pastor Niemoller spoke for the thousands and thousands of men like me when he spoke (too modestly of himself) and said that, when the Nazis attacked the Communists, he was a little uneasy, but, after all, he was not a Communist, and so he did nothing; and then they attacked the Socialists, and he was a little uneasier, but, still, he was not a Socialist, and he did nothing; and then the schools, the press, the Jews, and so on, and he was always uneasier, but still he did nothing. And then they attacked the Church, and he was a Churchman, and he did something -- but then it was too late."

"You see," Mayer's colleague went on, "one doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for the one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even to talk, alone; you don't want to 'go out of your way to make trouble.' Why not? -- Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

"Uncertainty is a very important factor, and, instead of decreasing as time goes on, it grows. Outside, in the streets, in the general community, everyone is happy. One hears no protest, and certainly sees none. You know, in France or Italy there will be slogans against the government painted on walls and fences; in Germany, outside the great cities, perhaps, there is not even this. In the university community, in your own community, you speak privately to your colleagues, some of whom certainly feel as you do; but what do they say? They say, 'It's not so bad' or 'You're seeing things' or 'You're an alarmist.'

"And you are an alarmist. You are saying that this must lead to this, and you can't prove it. These are the beginnings, yes; but how do you know for sure when you don't know the end, and how do you know, or even surmise, the end?" (For more Hartmann, see thomhartmann.com.)

Christmas Bells and Frazzled Nerves

Right wing Christian leaders concoct campaigns to "convince people that there is a 'them' out there -- liberals in this case -- who are out to destroy America's moral fiber and are thus responsible for working-class misery," Thom Hartmann wrote.

A case in point: a "Christian Response" e-Alert capitalizing on the frenzy of the right's holiday campaign "to STOP groups like the ACLU from removing all mentions of Christmas from the public square!" This e-Alert comes complete with a laundry list "of the most blatant examples of attacks on Christmas this year."

The centerpiece of this campaign was a radio ad aired "on over 200 STATIONS across America, EVERY DAY for the past TWO WEEKS, reaching over TWO MILLION PEOPLE each week with the message of how they can stand up and DEFEND Christmas from these blatant attacks." In addition, Christian Response ran "full-page newspaper ads in national publications reaching over one hundred thousand readers, plus an internet ad campaign that has reached hundreds of thousands more viewers online! (Emphasis in the original text.)

Frank Zappa's Warning

The late Frank Zappa, best known for fronting The Mothers of Invention -- a difficult-to-categorize late sixties/early seventies group of disparate musicians -- was a dynamic figure; a composer, singer-guitarist, bandleader, graphic artist, filmmaker, satirist, political commentator and author of *The REAL Frank Zappa Book*.

He was also a passionate defender of the First Amendment and testified before Congress on censorship-related issues. His most publicized appearance was on September 19, 1985, before the US Senate Commerce, Technology, and Transportation committee, where he spoke out against the Parents Music Resource Center or PMRC, a music censorship organization founded by then-Senator Al Gore's wife Tipper Gore, and several other political wives, including those of five members of the committee.

During his 1986 appearance on CNN's *Crossfire*, Zappa made it clear that the hullabaloo surrounding the censorship of rock lyrics was an attempt to suppress free speech. In the tradition of the late Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, Zappa said that he didn't "believe there are any words that need to be suppressed."

After getting steadily bashed by his counterpart, the conservative Washington Times columnist John Lofton, he turned toward him and told him to "kiss my ass." The program, which hadn't started out with any references to smooching, devolved to that point after an exasperated and infuriated Lofton kept accusing Zappa of refusing to condemn rock lyrics that encouraged incest.

During those early days of "Crossfire" -- and some might argue it has remained that way until only the past few years -- the left was barely distinguishable from the right. "From the left" was Tom Braden, who ran the C.I.A.'s covert cultural division in the early 1950's and 30 years later could barely muster up a coherent progressive thought, and "from the right" was a younger and surprisingly less irascible Robert Novak. (To view the entire interview, see ifilm.com.)

Later, when Lofton claimed that America's families were under attack and threatened by out-of-control musicians, Zappa stated clearly that the "the biggest threat to America is not communism, it's moving America toward a fascist theocracy, and everything that's happened during the Reagan Administration is steering us right down that path." (For more on Zappa's life see [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#).)

Bringing it All Back Home

As year five of the reign of George W. Bush unfolds, consider Team Bush's modus operandi: a cabinet in lock-step with the president; secret policy-making meetings and back door deals with the corporate elite; legislation crafted by a Republican-controlled Congress with little dissent by a timid opposition party; misinformation and disinformation campaigns; a permanent war on terrorism that tolerates the widespread abuse of detainees and secret prisons; and the chipping away at civil liberties.

"With the same party controlling all branches of government, there has been minimal public debate over the policies of the current Bush administration, even as it launched two wars, reversed long-standing policies on worker safety and the environment and cut taxes for the rich while 2.7 million private-sector jobs have been lost and the number of unemployed Americans has increased by more than 45 percent under its watch," John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton point out in *Banana Republicans -- How the Right Wing Is Turning America Into a One-Party State* (Tarcher/Penguin 2004).

Don't expect the jackboots to march around the corner tomorrow. Don't expect homes to be indiscriminately raided. Don't expect citizens to be hauled off in the dead of night -- although that has been the case with indiscriminate arrests of many Muslim immigrants since 9/11.

Consider, however, the anti-democratic warning signs: the Patriot Act and subsequent civil liberties-busting legislation; election snafus seamlessly fading into history; a war carried out on the basis of misinformation and disinformation; secret prisons where captives are tortured.

Think about how things change slowly, yet dramatically, while good people either aren't paying attention or are too satisfied to raise their voices.

"As nightfall does not come all at once, neither does oppression. In both instances, there is a twilight. And it is in such twilight that we all must be aware of change in the air -- however slight -- lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness." -- Justice William O. Douglas, US Supreme Court (1939-75)

Bill Berkowitz is a longtime observer of the conservative movement. His [WorkingForChange](#) column Conservative Watch documents the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the American Right.