

Atlanta Freethought News

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The April Meeting

The April 10 AFS meeting will feature a speech by AFS member **Kathy Sayeg** on "Dealing with a Hostage Situation." A discussion will follow. The subject was inspired by the actions of Ashley Smith, who was recently a hostage of accused killer Brian Nichols. Ms. Smith was able to talk Mr. Nichols into giving himself up.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at the Atlanta Freethought Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA. (Feel free to arrive early for discussion and coffee.) To get there from Atlanta, take I-400 north past I-285 by 8 miles to Exit 7B, which is GA-140. Take GA-140 (Holcomb Bridge Road) west about 1 mile and turn left at Grimes Bridge Road. Go 0.2 miles to 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, which is on the right.

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at **Las Margaritas Restaurant**, 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road (Atlanta) on Friday, April 15, at 7:00 PM. To get there, take I-85 to the Cheshire Bridge Road exit (Exit 88) on the north side of Atlanta. Turn east at the light and go about 1.5 miles to the restaurant.

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet at 4:00 to 6:00 at the AF Center on Sunday, April 17.

The **Tuesday Lunch Bunch** meets every Tuesday at 12:30 at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy in Atlanta.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, April 24, at 12:30.

Fellowship of Reason Meeting

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of each month at 12:30 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see www.fellowshipofreason.com.

Atheist Meetup at Hand in Hand

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, April 24, at 4:00 PM. The informal gathering will be at Hand in Hand Pub, 752 N. Highland Ave, in Atlanta. (404-872-1001)

AFS Meetings and Activities

Apr 9: Highway Cleanup at Glenridge Ramp, 2:00 PM.
Apr 10: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
Apr 15: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
Apr 17: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 2:00 PM.
Apr 17: AFS Discussion Group at AF Center, 4:00 PM.

SOS Meets at AF Center

The **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** meets at the Atlanta Freethought Center every Tuesday evening at 7:30pm. SOS is the secular substitute for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Sue Garland Moves Away

Former AFS Vice President Sue Garland recently announced that she is moving to Wilmington, North Carolina. In fact, her Atlanta house is now sold, and she's bought a house in Wilmington.

Congratulations to Sue on her move and her new house! We will miss her at AFS meetings.

Atheist News to Charge for Service

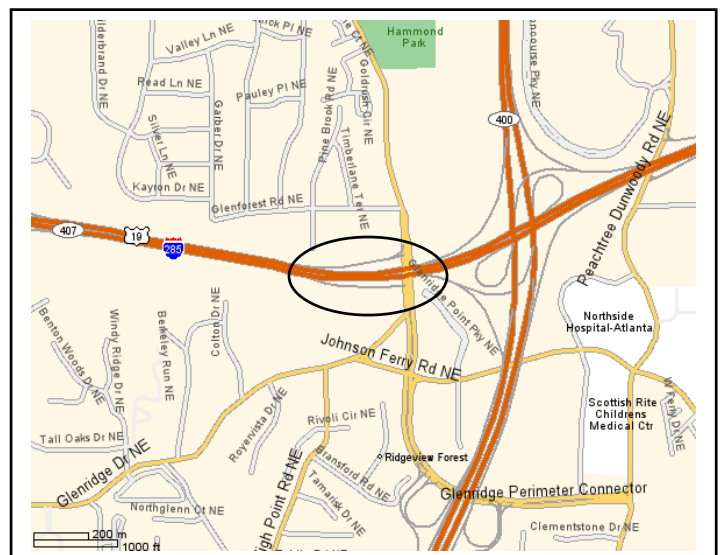
Larry Darby, editor of Atheist News, a daily atheist news digest, announced on April 1 that voluntary contributions have failed to provide adequate support for the daily e-mail dispatch. "To correct that cost-benefit imbalance... subscription fees will be assessed," Darby said.

Learn more about Atheist News at www.atheistlaw.org.

Highway Cleanup is This Saturday

The Atlanta Freethought Society will participate in its first Adopt-A-Highway cleanup on Saturday, April 9 at 2:00 PM. The cleanup work will be on the Glenridge Ramp at Exit 27. This is the long ramp along I-285 that connects Glenridge Road to I-285 near GA400. We will clean the ramps on the north side and the south side of I-285.

Please park along Glenridge Road. The Highway Department will provide safety vests and trash bags. We will have a short meeting on the north ramp at Glenridge Road at 2:00 to discuss safety and the work to be done.





Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AFS Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

April 10: AFS member Kathy Sayeg will speak on "Dealing with a Hostage Situation." A discussion will follow.

May 8: TBD

June 12: The meeting will include a public forum on Evolution, with special guest Rev. Phillip Satterfield of the MacLand Road Church of Christ.

To join the AFS Forum e-mail list, send a blank message to AFSforum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the AFS Announcements list, send a blank email to afs-announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the Georgia Freethinkers Letter Writing Cooperative, send a blank email to flwc-ga-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

You can unsubscribe by sending an email to xxxx-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com.

The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run organization dedicated to advancing freethought and protecting the rights and reputation of freethinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists.

We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

We define *freethought* as "the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other's company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

Atlanta Freethought News an AFS publication

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Membership in AFS is \$25/year for individuals, \$35 for households, and \$10 for students/low income/under 21. Sustaining members (individual) \$100 and sustaining members (households) \$125.

Subscriptions alone are \$20 for 12 issues, \$25 to Canada/Mexico, \$30 for other addresses. Please make checks and money orders payable to Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc.

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The Terri Schiavo Case

From a Press Release by the Council for Secular Humanism

Theresa "Terri" Schiavo, the Florida resident who has spent the last fifteen years in a persistent vegetative state, has spent recent weeks at the center of a political and legal maelstrom. The courts consistently found that her husband, Michael Schiavo, was carrying out his wife's wishes in trying to cease life-support measures; meanwhile, parents Robert and Mary Schindler, arguing that Terri would wish to live, waged an unrelenting battle to keep her feeding tube inserted.

Spokespeople for the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) say that, as heartrending as the case was, the courts made the right decision. In a recent statement issued by the Council, David Koepsell, Executive Director of the CSH, said that "fundamentalist political ideologues have seized upon the Terri Schiavo case to make a bold, federal play against individual liberties."

"The Council for Secular Humanism praises the Florida and federal courts' rulings to let Terri Schiavo's decision to die with dignity stand," Koepsell said. "We hope that politicians who have interjected themselves into this personal decision, for cynical political gain, will think long and hard about what this means for liberty and justice."

Medical ethicist Richard Hull calls the situation a power grab by religious conservatives and a betrayal of the sanctity of marriage. "Americans will not stand for the burdens of having to defend family decisions, confirmed by state courts, before federal panels," he said. "They will decisively reject such meddlesome moralistic madness and beat back these assaults on reason and decency." Hull urged all Americans to put their wishes in writing, such as with a living will. "Until the religious right rediscovers the Bill of Rights, we must all act to protect ourselves and presume no respect by others for our informal understandings with loved ones."

Meanwhile, other spokespeople cautioned that the choice might not always be left to the individual. "The public should be made aware that the Catholic Church owns about one third of all hospitals in the United States, many without the public's knowledge," warned Toni Van Pelt, Executive Director of CFI-Florida. "The Church does not recognize end-of-life directives."

While most Americans may think of secular humanists as a fringe group, the Council's assessment of the Schiavo case is in accord with public opinion. Several recent polls (including one by CBS News and one by CNN, USA Today, and Gallup) show that a majority of Americans disapprove of lawmakers' intervention in the case. Senator Christopher Shays of Connecticut described the situation by saying, "The Republican Party of Lincoln has become a party of theocracy."

THE HYPOCRISY OF THE "CULTURE OF LIFE" — A STATEMENT BY THE COUNCIL FOR SECULAR HUMANISM

The fundamentalist political ideologues seized upon the Terri Schiavo case to make a bold, federal play against individual liberties. Once again, they have redefined and misconstrued the issues in the media in order to pursue a religious agenda. That agenda cares not at all about the dignity or quality of an individual life nor of the fundamental liberties we, as Americans and as human beings, are supposed to enjoy. Terry Schiavo expressed her desires when she was a conscious person. The proper venue for discovering her expressed desires was the courts, and the lengthy proceedings gave due process to Ms. Schiavo. The conclusion was that she never intended for her vegetative shell, with no medical possibility of recovery, to be kept "alive" through a feeding tube. The courts ruled that her express wishes, as discovered through numerous witnesses and lengthy hearings, should be respected. Yet this ruling, which is consistent with a re-

spect for individual liberty, and the ability of a person to choose dignity in death, angered and mobilized those who view life as little more than the beating of a heart. Their religious motivations are clear. Their "culture of life" views life as nothing more than a vehicle for "souls," and the complex system of human attributes which make us persons, such as autonomy, creativity, emotions, and other essential elements of humanity, mean nothing. This is why so-called conservatives supported federal intervention in the most personal of decisions. The hypocrisy of this stance couldn't be more clear.

President Bush argued that we must "err on the side of life" whenever possible. This was the argument that some governors, including Illinois Governor George Ryan, made in suspending death sentences until a full judicial review could be made. This decision was supported by the stark fact that a number of death-penalty cases have been reversed in light of new technology and new evidence, and so, it made sense to err on the side of life by having a full judicial review. In Texas, then Governor Bush never suspended a single capital sentence for further review, even when attorneys for convicts may have slept through some of their proceedings. There, he did not err on the side of life. Has he experienced a sudden change of heart? In the Schiavo case, the courts have reviewed and reviewed, and testimony has been taken, and appeals have been made surpassing the number and thoroughness of even a death-penalty review process. The conclusion remained the same: Terry Schiavo did not want to have her body kept alive if her mind, that which makes her a person, was dead.

Now, these politically motivated religious ideologues, who wish to push their narrow view of "life" on the populace by act of law, would have you believe that Terry Schiavo is a piece of property, and that despite

The Terri Schiavo Case (*continued*)

her wishes, her parents should be given the chance to “take her.” Terry Schiavo was not a piece of property. She was a person who expressed her wishes, and neither her husband nor her parents can usurp her role in deciding the course of her death. This is the essence of being a free person,

the ability to choose for oneself, and this is the essential justice of the courts’ decisions to respect her wishes, expressed by a free, autonomous, mature person.

The Council for Secular Humanism praises the Florida and federal courts’ rulings to let Terry Schiavo’s decision

to die with dignity stand, and we hope that politicians who have interjected themselves into this personal decision, for cynical political gain, will think long and hard about what this means for liberty and justice.

[From a March 25 press release by the Council for Secular Humanism.]

Shiavo Tragedy Reveals True Agenda

From a Press Release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State

The legal and political battle over Terri Schiavo exposed the Religious Right’s radical agenda and its extraordinary power in Washington, D.C., and now Americans should expect that influence to be aimed at the nation’s judiciary, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Mrs. Schiavo, a Florida woman in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years, was the subject of a lengthy legal dispute between her husband and other family members over whether her feeding tube should be removed. Until her death today, Religious Right forces used Mrs. Schiavo as a symbol in their drive to make government apply their fundamentalist beliefs to everyone.

“At the behest of the Religious Right, Congress and President George W. Bush intervened in a place where they didn’t belong – a personal family matter,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. “They failed, and now furious Religious Right leaders will step up their assault on our nation’s courts.”

Lynn said James Dobson, Pat Robertson and other fundamentalist activists are going to demand that the

Senate confirm judges who will advance their agenda, which includes repealing church-state separation, overturning reproductive rights, blocking stem-cell research and rolling back civil rights protections for gay people.

“The Schiavo tragedy was seized upon by fundamentalists and their political allies in a bid to force their narrow moral code on everyone,” said AU’s Lynn. “Religious Right leaders want to stack the judiciary with right-wing ideologues. Then, there will be no one to stand in their way when they intrude into the most personal decisions of our lives.”

“During these past weeks,” Lynn said, “they aimed their venom at the state and federal courts involved in the Schiavo matter. They harbor great contempt for the nation’s judiciary and the constitutional concept of separation of powers. They will demand radical changes.”

“Congressional leaders Bill Frist and Tom DeLay are ready to work hard to push the kind of judges these religious extremists desire,” Lynn concluded. “Frist and DeLay have said so in closed-door speeches to a Religious Right group. Defenders of American constitutional values must make their

voices heard and stand against this Religious Right power grab.”

Days before Congress passed a law forcing federal courts to get involved in the Schiavo situation, Senate Majority Leader Frist (R-Tenn.) told a Family Research Council gathering at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. that he was beholden to the Religious Right’s agenda and promised to confirm right-wing judges. He also pledged to re-write Senate rules to ensure that a minority filibuster could not be mounted to block far-right judicial nominees. (To hear that address to the Family Research Council, go to http://www.au.org/site/PageServer?pagename=press_audio.)

“Polls show that an overwhelming number of Americans did not want lawmakers to meddle in the Schiavo case,” Lynn said. “But Religious Right leaders don’t care what other people think. They believe they have a divine mandate to force everyone to follow their dictates.”

“This time, the Religious Right has gone too far,” Lynn concluded. “The fundamentalist threat to our liberties has been laid bare for all to see. Americans must see to it that the Religious Right does not succeed.”

Regarding the Schiavo case, Tim Gordinier, director of public policy for the Institute for Humanist Studies said in the March 23 issue of *Humanist Network News*, “We used to hear a lot of complaints about ‘judicial activism’ from the right – about judges usurping the prerogatives of the legislative branch. Well, here is its opposite evil – legislative activism, when the legislature overrides the rule of law in the interest of scoring some political points.”

“The Schiavo case should have been essentially a private matter, dealt with – should have been dealt with – by the state court system. It certainly was not an appropriate issue for a legislative body – and especially not one at the federal level.”

“This is all part and parcel of an effort to push a fundamentalist religious agenda on the rest of us. The right to self-determination or self-ownership... is being threatened by folks who think they know what’s best for us.”

Introducing the Constitution Restoration Act

By W. David Kubiak

Tired of waiting for the Second Coming to enforce Christ's rule on Earth? Fortunately, so is your Congress and they know how to "bring it on."

Just in case you've briefly fallen behind on your rightwing mailing lists, you might have missed the March 3rd filing of Senate bill S520 and House version HR1070, AKA the "Constitution Restoration Act" (CRA).

In the worshipful words of the Conservative Caucus, this historic legislation will "Restore our Constitution," mainly by barring *any* federal court or judge from ever again reviewing "any matter to the extent that relief is sought against an entity of Federal, State, or local government, or against an officer or agent of Federal, State, or local government (whether or not acting in official or personal capacity), concerning that entity's, officer's, or agent's acknowledgment of God as the sovereign source of law, liberty, or government."

In other words, the bill ensures that God's divine word (and our infallible leaders' interpretation thereof) will hereafter trump all our pathetic democratic notions about freedom, law and rights – and our courts can't say a thing. This, of course, will take "In God We Trust" to an entirely new level, because soon He (and His personally anointed political elite) will be all the legal recourse we have left.

This is not a joke, a test, or a fit of libertarian paranoia. The CRA already has 28 sponsors in the House and Senate, and a March 20 call to lead sponsor Sen. Richard Shelby's office assures us that "we have the votes for passage." This is a highly credible projection as Bill Moyers observes in his 3/24/05 "Welcome to Doomsday" piece in the *New York Review of Books*: "The corporate, political, and Religious Right's hammerlock... extends to the US Congress. Nearly half of its members before the election – 231 legislators in all (more since the

election) – are backed by the Religious Right... Forty-five senators and 186 members of the 108th Congress earned 80 to 100 percent approval ratings from the most influential Christian Right advocacy groups."

This stunning bill and the movement behind it deserve immediate crash study on at least 3 different fronts.

First, consider the bill's hostile divorce of American jurisprudence from our hard-won secular history and international norms.

To again quote the Conservative Caucus: "This important bill will restrict the jurisdiction of the U.S. Supreme Court and all lower federal courts to that permitted by the U.S. Constitution, including on the subject of the acknowledgement of God (as in the Roy Moore 10 Commandments issue); and it also restricts federal courts from recognizing the laws of foreign countries and international law [e.g., against torture, global warming, unjust wars, etc. - ed.] as the supreme law of our land."

Regarding the last point, envision some doddering judges who still revere our Declaration of Independence's "decent respect to the opinions of mankind," and suppose they invoke in their rulings some international precepts from the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women or, God forbid, the Geneva Conventions. Well, under the CRA that would all be clearly illegal and, thank God, that's the last we'd ever hear from them.

Second, consider the political implications of replacing "we the people" with a Christian deity as the "sovereign source" of all our laws.

Imagine hyper-zealous officers or "entities" of the Federal, State, or local government (like a governor, legislature or school board) that mandate Christian prayers, rituals and/or sta-

tuary in public buildings under their control. Were this to happen, some local Jews, Muslims and/or Buddhists might be moved to hire a lawyer and legally object. But if the CRA passes, their objection would be beyond any court's jurisdiction and that's the last we'd ever hear of that. It in fact demands "impeachment, conviction, and removal of judges" who dare to even hear a case that challenges its "Last Days" morphing of Christian church and state.

Third, consider the incessant mainstream media blackout on the bill's existence and importance.

The potential impact of the Constitution Restoration Act on American life, law and politics is so radical and vast that you would expect a boiling national debate. Yet, it sure is curious how everyone in the media seems terrifically busy looking the other way. If you want yet another dramatic metric of US journalistic dysfunction, try Googling "Constitution Restoration Act" in their News category and see what you get. Today, three weeks after the bill was filed, I find a grand total of three throwaway mentions in Alabama's Shelby County Reporter, the Decatur Daily, and the Massachusetts Daily Collegian. "Terri Schiavo" in contrast will net you over a thousand news hits, and "Michael Jackson" just passed 36,000 with a bullet.

Before the CRA takes force and reduces legal education to a Bible study course, what say we undertake a little Constitutional defense of our own? To get up to speed on the current Christian Right agenda, Moyers' "Welcome to Doomsday", Katherine Yurica's "The Despoiling of America" and John Buchanan's "Fixing America" are excellent places to start.

None of these analyses offer a silver bullet or paint a pretty picture, but as students of the Religious Right know, spreading the courage to face the truth is really the only hope we've got.

[From www.911truth.org.]

Americans United Blasts Congressional Leaders' Promise to Push Religious Right Agenda

Top congressional leaders have promised to push the Religious Right agenda on judicial nominations, church politicking, abortion, marriage and the Terri Schiavo case, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

On March 23, Americans United released audiotapes of closed-door addresses by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay to a Family Research Council (FRC) gathering March 17-18 at Washington, D.C.'s Willard Hotel. The pair talked about a range of political issues, using the Schiavo case as a springboard.

"Religious Right leaders are determined to run all of our lives, from the moment of conception through the end of life," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "And top congressional leaders are conspiring behind closed doors in Washington to help them do it. It's appalling."

"Frist and DeLay have wrapped sanctimonious language around political posturing," said Lynn. "They are using Mrs. Schiavo's personal tragedy in Florida to burnish their credentials with an increasingly powerful component of the Republican Party. It's a sad, cynical political ploy."

Mrs. Schiavo, a Florida woman, was in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years. Her husband, Michael Schiavo, fought a long legal battle to remove her feeding tube. Religious Right forces and their allies in Congress and Florida government repeatedly tried to intervene in the situation, despite medical advice and court decisions that support Mr. Schiavo.

During the FRC meeting, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) assured attendees that they would do what it takes to keep Schiavo connected to a feeding tube and also would exert great power to push a whole host of issues central to

the Religious Right's agenda.

DeLay urged the gathering to contact lawmakers in both chambers to support legislation that would allow churches to become much more involved in partisan politicking. The Texas Republican blasted current federal tax law, which bars both secular and religious nonprofit groups from endorsing political candidates.

"It forces Christians back into the church and that's what is going on," DeLay claimed. "That's not what Christ asked us to do. We have to fight back."

Beyond swearing allegiance to the Religious Right's agenda, DeLay, who has faced increased attention for alleged ethics violations, also bemoaned "personal attacks" against him and other conservative leaders and said the Schiavo case would highlight those attacks.

"One thing that God has brought to us is Terri Schiavo, to help elevate the visibility of what is going on in America," DeLay told the crowd.

"This is exactly the issue that is going on in America, of attacks against the conservative movement, against me and against many others," DeLay said. He complained that "the other side" was leading the attack, with a goal "to defeat the conservative movement."

According to DeLay, a "whole syndicate" of "do-gooder" forces are arrayed against him in "a huge nationwide concerted effort to destroy everything we believe in."

FRC President Tony Perkins assured DeLay of the group's support and asked audience members to contact Republican lawmakers and demand that they back the House majority leader.

Americans United's Lynn said, "It is dishonorable for Rep. DeLay to use the Schiavo case and cloak himself in Christian piety in order to evade accountability on ethics complaints."

Frist also told the FRC attendees that he was dedicated to issues dear to

their hearts.

"You stand up for our families, our children, you never back down," Frist told the gathering via speakerphone. "That's why we are winning these larger battles today. Together we are leading our nation forward. We have a president, a House of Representatives, a Senate that shares our values and the American people are on our side."

"In this Congress we are going to continue to work on the issues that are important to you, to me and above all, America's future," Frist continued.

Those issues include, Frist maintained, the confirmation of "good judges," protecting the "sanctity of marriage" and protecting "the unborn." He said, "I'm also committed to ending the [Senate Democratic] minority's filibuster [on judges] and restoring this 220 years or more of Senate tradition and history."

Frist was particularly adamant about fighting for a Federal Marriage Amendment, saying that, "We will take action to preserve and protect and defend the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman."

Americans United's Lynn said the comments by DeLay and Frist prove that Congress is beholden to the Religious Right's narrow vision for America.

"I find it appalling that top leaders of Congress are using the Schiavo tragedy to nurture their Religious Right base," Lynn said. "I am confident that the American people do not want their personal lives subjected to interference from Congress and their Religious Right allies."

(Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, DC. The organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.)

[From a March 23 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

And They Say Liberals Are Whiny!

By Massimo Pigliucci

It is rather amusing (when I'm in a good mood) to hear conservatives (especially religious ones) complain that they are "persecuted" in American society, that they don't get a say, that they have constantly to battle against the liberal media bias. What persecution? What liberal media? Don't get a say? What are these people talking about?

In the United States, conservatives now control the presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and a large number of state governorships. If we add to the list that the Supreme Court is increasingly conservative, and may soon become extremely so, in essence these people control the country -- and set the agenda for the rest of the world. What, then, is there to complain about? Why is this not enough?

Well, one thing to understand about ideological zealots (again, both of the religious and non-religious variety, though the former are by far more common) is that they absolutely know they are right, so there really is no point in considering alternative opinions, is there? Moreover, since they tend to see things in apocalyptic terms, always painted in stark black and white, then anything less than 100 percent victory can be construed as a failure of cosmic proportions.

There is, of course, one little area of American life where conservatives are still by far in the minority: academia. By the latest estimates, about 70 percent of faculty at U.S. universities consider themselves "on the left" within the current political spectrum. Of course, this has immediately raised the ire of conservatives, who have recently had the audacity to claim that there is a nationwide conspiracy to keep right-leaning faculty out of our campuses. It isn't clear whether the charge applies only to state universities or includes the private ones (in the latter case, one wonders how many liberal-leaning faculty are on the payroll, say, at Bob Jones "University"). But the fact remains indisputable: academia is still a bastion of lib-

eralism, and that ain't gonna change overnight, no matter how widespread the "outrage."

Outside of silly conspiracy theories, why exactly is it that academia is full of liberals, and why is it that the majority of the media used to be equally favorable to moderately progressive positions? As in the case of any search for causal explanations, we must start with observations aimed at identifying the characteristics that separate the two groups in question (academia and "the real world"), to see if such differences may be conducive to the formulation of sensible hypotheses about the underlying causal links.

There are three things, roughly speaking, that come to mind: the high diversity (ethnic, and of opinions) on college campuses; the financial independence of faculty (after tenure); and, oh yeah, the fact that the very idea of a "liberal arts" education is to foster critical thinking, dialogue, and the endorsement of positions based on thoughtful consideration of facts and values. Hmm, could it be that this triplet makes for an environment in which ultraconservative ideas just don't flourish? Could it be that religious bigotry simply can't take the challenge of an ongoing open discussion, where there are no sacred cows and everything is fair game for public criticism? Could this be why academic freedom tends to be extremely limited in ultraconservative, ultra-religious campuses?

But, wait! Aren't those very characteristics of dialogue and critical thinking precisely the ones everybody agrees should be encouraged among the general public, since only they can -- in the long run -- maintain a healthy democracy? Ah, but there is the rub: the religious and ultraconservative right does not really want democracy, certainly not in the sense of a citizenry that is intelligent, well-informed, and capable of making decisions based on more than a knee-jerk reaction to MTV-style simplistic slogans.

The real question, unfortunately, is

whether there is anything that even remotely looks like a "liberal" wing of a political party, or more broadly, a "left" in the American political spectrum. Frankly, Bill Clinton has always looked to me like a moderate Republican, and it is hard to believe that Howard Dean is considered a "radical" among Democrats. Have these people ever seen a radical in their lives? Thanks to the right-wing propaganda (and direct or indirect conservative control of most of the media), the American public has come to believe that the words "liberal" and "progressive" are akin to, God forbid, socialist or communist! There essentially is no left in this country, just a moderate center, followed by a right, an ultra-right, and a super-duper-ultra-right.

Pretty sad, but one has to admit that the extensive, grass-roots program of social reengineering begun by the Christian Coalition and similar groups in the mid-70s has finally succeeded and, save for the unlikely possibility of miracles, the political realignment is here to stay.

What, then, are we to do about it? We need to learn from the competition, and turn their own successful tactics against them. I am not talking about attempting to rig the vote during presidential elections. I am referring to -- quite simply -- going back to the basics. Pick young, energetic people to run for office. And do equip them with simple, bite-size, messages. (At the moment, that's all that a large chunk of the American public seems to be able to deal with.) The time for more sophisticated political discourse may come again, in a few decades. But we can't keep seeking the high moral and political road, while the other side is ruining not just this country, but the rest of the world as well. Wake up, smell the coffee, and look for the next Bill Clinton (as ultra-moderate as he was): a good southern boy, politically centrist, with a charming smile and a simple message. It still beats the hell out of what we got now.

What brought Brian Nichols and Ashley Smith together?

The following article was to appear in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Faith and Values section on April 2, but was pre-empted by articles about the death of Pope John Paul II. Perhaps it will run on April 9.

By Ed Buckner, Atlanta Freethought Society

It seems clear that mere chance brought Brian Nichols and Ashley Smith together, however glad we should all be that it happened. Atheists, freethinkers, and secular humanists probably disagree among ourselves on most things as much as Christians do among themselves. But all of us should be impressed with Ashley Smith. She demonstrated courage, ingenuity, and compassion, and she deserves the recognition and rewards that have come her way. She also showed, by her actions and by what she reportedly said to Nichols, that human beings live better lives if they have hope and purpose in their lives.

Humanists believe in redemption, even in what could be called "salvation," too. We know that we can change our own lives and the lives of others, though it takes work and care to make it happen. We know that how we treat each other matters greatly and that living thoughtful lives, wisely choosing and pursuing goals, enriches us. We seek happiness for ourselves, but we know that often the surest path to happiness includes serving others. Ethics and moral principles are crucial to living the good life, as are teaching the next generation to know right from wrong and to seek truth and justice.

None of this means, however, that we can pretend that there are no important differences between us and theists. We do not believe there is any supernatural power who can or does intervene in human lives. We find no credible evidence that God has given us any commandments or even any advice. To the many Christians who claim the Nichols-Smith encounter was a miracle or part of God's plan, we have to ask, "Why didn't He bring them together before Nichols killed and maimed so many others, before Nichols's own life was so irrevocably ruined?" The families of many victims are suffering pain and loss that most of us can barely even imagine, suffering that will not likely be easily assuaged by being told that it was all for a greater good purpose. We also believe that only those injured can provide any meaningful forgiveness, that redemption cannot reasonably come from any outside source, even from a supreme power.

We conclude that human beings must be responsible for human actions, including for developing purposeful, meaningful lives and strong moral standards. We see no reason to believe that there is some external force looking out for us or giving us purpose or rules to live by. To those who claim that there exists an abso-

lute, unchanging moral standard provided by a perfect deity, we have many questions. For example, "Where was this standard when Christian preachers used the Bible to teach, right here in Georgia not that many generations ago, it was part of God's plan for some humans to own others, thereby enabling 'ignorant, savage' Africans to hear the good news of Christianity?"

With knowledge of history and the discoveries science makes, human beings can predict and control more of what happens to us than ever before, but life is still full of uncertainty. Most of us, fortunately, don't have a Brian Nichols dropping in, and the next murderer who drops in on the next Ashley Smith may not even respond well to the kind of approach Smith used, but we should try to be prepared for the unknown.

Ashley Smith is a human hero, successful in finally stopping Nichols's vicious rampage because she had the admirable ability to communicate empathy, to help him see that human lives matter. All of us should learn from her actions and give her credit. But no superhuman strengths or superhuman weaknesses were on display that terrible day, only human ones.

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Ried Crowe's letter was in the *Christian Science Monitor* on March 30, 2005. He responded to an article by Pat Buchanan in which Mr. Buchanan claimed that "we permit federal agents of the IRS to monitor speech in churches and to punish priests, pastors, or rabbis who speak truth to power by telling their congregations that some men and women are standing up for morality, while others are not."

Buchanan Just Doesn't Get It

Mr. Buchanan wonderfully demonstrates how all major political parties have abused the IRS tax code that prohibits tax-exempt churches from partaking in partisan politics. However, he then goes off the propagandist deep end and tries to paint the picture that this statute is "muzzling our religious leaders."

The First Amendment guarantees free speech, and there's no court in the land that would allow anybody to "muzzle" any religious leader. If any tax-exempt organization (religious or otherwise) would like to "unmuzzle" its leaders, all it needs to do is relinquish its 501c(3) status and pay taxes, just like the Democratic and Republican parties — and all Americans — do.

Ried Crowe
Powder Springs, GA

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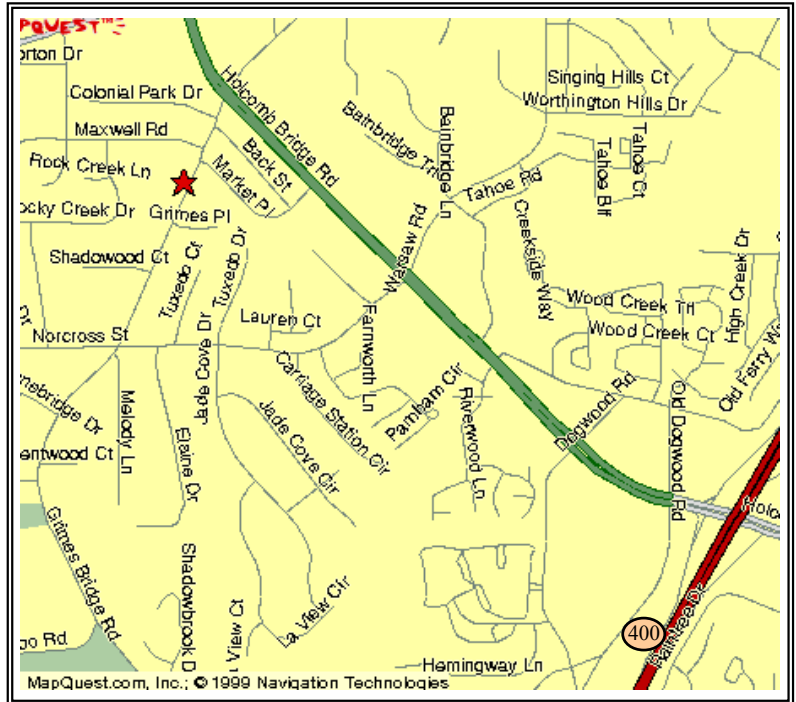
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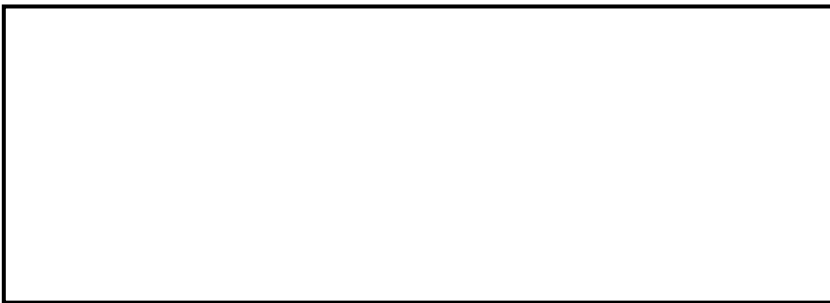
Atlanta Freethought Society

**The April Meeting:
Sunday, April 10
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Kathy Sayeg**



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