

Harold Weisberg 11/14/87

DARK DAYS - OR DARK WAYS?

Beginning with radio and TV reporting the afternoon of Sunday, November 8, there was extensive coverage of the hijacking of a small Belgian pleasure boat carrying eight Belgian and French Jews, including women and children, by what most accounts described as "the Abu Nidal terrorist group." Abu Nidal is a man described by Roy Meachum as a patriot, an Arab hero. That reminded me of Mr. Meachum's boast, made when he was criticizing someone this past summer, that when he makes a mistake he corrects it.

I've been waiting a long time for him to confess to those who read our local papers that he was wrong about Abu Nidal - and not Nidal alone; to acknowledge that Nidal and his gang are not "patriots" and heroes but are cold-blooded murderers, guilty of many terrorist atrocities.

For those who do not remember back more than a year, Abu Nidal's terrorists hijacked the Italian cruise ship, Achille Lauro, and in cold blood killed an aged and ill American, Leon Klinghofer, and then threw him and the wheelchair to which he was confined into the Mediterranean. Unlike Mr. Meachum, I do not consider the murder of the incapacitated heroism or patriotism.

Representing himself as an expert on law, Mr. Meachum criticized our government for capturing these terrorists. They were charged with their crimes, which include piracy, and convicted. It is my understanding that the laws relating to piracy grant the right of hot pursuit and thus the capture of those cold-blooded murderers Mr. Meachum told his readers were only heroes and patriots was not illegal.

In his most recent "patriotic" piracy and terrorism activity, taking eight innocent non-Israeli Jews hostage on the high seas, Nidal's purpose, according to his own people, was to disrupt the then current Arab summit where, it was hoped and as looked possible, more Arab unity could be achieved.

Nidal was particularly anxious to embarrass the host, Jordan's King Hussein. This is the same Hussein who kicked the PLO out when they tried to

take over Jordan.

All 21 Arab powers, unpersuaded by Nidal's concept of Arab patriotism, instead voted unanimously to condemn non-Arab (Persian) Iran's intransigence in its war with Iraq. Some Arab "patriot," Mr. Meachum's Nidal!

I was reminded also that about a month before this newest in a string of Nidal terrorists acts Mr. Meachum had pontificated at some length about "dark days," the opposition to Reagan's appointment of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. Among the nasty and serious factual errors essential to his prating, errors nobody at all familiar with politics and how the Congress works ought have made, was his unqualified statement that the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, who have the Constitutionally imposed duty of evaluating and acting on such nominations, would "slink" into oblivion by hiding their votes and that their votes ~~would be lost~~ ^{set} in the mass of votes by the 100 Senators on the Senate floor.

Inevitably, the exact opposite was the actuality. Each and every one of the Judiciary committee members made a statement in which he set forth his reasons for his vote. Thereafter, pretty much the same was true of all the members of the Senate when they cast the largest vote ever against any Supreme Court nominee. All was reported. There was not and could not have been any hiding.

Before this voting I criticized the error of Mr. Meachum's running off at the mouth for money and I reminded him of his proud boast that he confesses his errors but had yet to do so about a number of matters, mostly anti-Semitic writings I had addressed with specifics, not generalities. I described his "dark days" writing as, among other things, inaccurate and venomous. It was, in fact, stupid. There just was no possibility at all, given the enormous attention to the major controversy of the days, every word broadcast by radio and TV, that any member of the Judiciary committee, even had he so intended, could hide how he voted. Given the subject matter and the fact that for weeks

their views had been exposed to the entire world, word by word, there was no reason to believe that any one of the members would have wanted to.

Consistent with a long record, Mr. Meachum was silent but his proxy, Bruce Ivins, was not silent.

Of all the criticisms I have made of Mr. Meachum's writings in these papers, he has yet to confront what I've said. Once, in an indulgence of high-school level journalism and without mentioning my name, he did threaten to sue me for libel. There was, of course, no libel at all in my criticisms of his writings, and he knew this very well. But it was the one gesture he made toward self-respect and toward his clique and those who are impressed with his indulgences of prejudice and self-promotion.

I then challenged Mr. Ivins to address ~~publicly~~ ^{publicly and} my criticisms ~~factually, and~~ ^{factually, and} not without context as he did in his letter. I said that if he did I'd respond factually, point by point.

"Make my day!" I wrote. He did write me a private, lengthy, rambling irrelevancy in which he alleged that, a la Clint Eastwood, I had threatened to shoot him! Actually! He did say just that!

Apparently it did not occur to Mr. Ivins that our most eminent practitioner of the authoritarianism Mr. Meachum has endorsed in his columns is fond of saying "make my day" and it is he I had in mind, never having seen a Clint Eastwood movie.

Mr. Meachum's proxy, like Mr. Meachum, has yet to address my actual criticisms of Mr. Meachum's serious factual errors and his indulgence of prejudice, his serious misinforming of his readers about matters of moment in national and international affairs. Because I was correct, in both factual criticisms and the opinions I offered, neither Mr. Meachum nor Mr. Ivins will. They cannot.

On occasion, in what I described as self-puffery, Mr. Meachus^M has represented himself as in the glorious tradition of American writing.

In a representative society such as ours, those of us who write about matters significant to the electorate have the obligation of truthfulness when we deal with fact and honesty when we offer opinions. This has not been true of those of Mr. Meachum's columns I have criticized.

I don't know how long Mr. Meachum has been writing, but if he began in the 1920s he has been writing as long as I have. I doubt that he has written as much about serious and controversial subjects as I have, and I didn't when I was a reporter, although I did when I was an investigative reporter, when I was a Senate investigator and editor, and when, during and after World War II, I was an intelligence analyst.

Not to boast - and to now I have avoided this in what with one of principle, self-respect and pride, one who is prepared to stand on and defend his writing, would have been a dialogue - I know that it is possible to write extensively and rapidly about the most controversial national issues and to be both accurate and fair.

I have published seven books on the investigations of the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I've received at least 15,000 letters from total strangers about them, and not one ever alleged that I was unfair ^{to him or to fact.} or ~~unfactual.~~

In the course of more than a decade of intense litigation under the Freedom of Information Act, I have filed many thousands of pages of detailed and documented affidavits, which made me subject to the penalties of perjury if I committed any material error, I was before unfriendly judges with the Department of Justice, the FBI and the CIA as my adversaries, and no error was ever shown in what I swore to.

This is not boasting because, if one knows what he is talking about and wants to be truthful, he is truthful and he does not err.

It is when a writer wants to puff himself up, make himself appear to be more important and more informed than he actually is and when he indulges

in preconceptions and prejudices that his dark ways give him dark days.

A manly, self-respecting writer, when called on this, apologizes. He does not have to be needled into apology.