



Attacks On NJ's Poet Laureate Reflect Political Cynicism

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By Walter L. Fields

Poem Meant To Incite, Provoke, Challenge And Offend The Status Quo.

New Jersey Poet Laureate Amiri Baraka is correct in stating that criticizing or questioning the policies or behavior of the Israeli government should not be construed as anti-Semitism; no more so than criticism of the government of an African nation should be immediately categorized as racist.

The present brouhaha over Mr. Baraka's poem "Somebody Blew Up America" is focused on seven lines that Jewish groups have latched onto as indicative of the poets' anti-Semitic tendencies. In the "offending" stanza Baraka cites Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in calling into question whether the Israeli government had any knowledge of a possible terrorist attack in New York City prior to September 11, 2001. Specifically, Mr. Baraka writes:

*Who knew the World Trade Center
was gonna get bombed
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the
Twin Towers
To stay home that day
Why did Sharon stay away?*

Does this make Mr. Baraka an anti-Semite? Absolutely not. As a poet he is expressing his opinion and speculating on an incident of international significance through his art. While the basis of his speculation may be called into question, his right to speak cannot. The state of Israel, or any nation, including the United States, is not beyond scrutiny. Dissent is the hallmark of our democracy and when efforts are made to suppress speech, particularly through art, we risk eroding the very freedoms that we purport to cherish.

It is also important to separate the interests of political representatives of the State from that of its citizenry. At no point in his poem does Mr. Baraka make a derogatory reference toward Jews or Judaism. To suggest that he does is both unfair and inaccurate. He does, in fact, question the behavior of the head of state of Israel.

Critics also apparently overlooked a stanza in the poem that can easily be interpreted as Mr. Baraka's identification with the historical suffering of the Jewish people.

*Who put the Jews in ovens,
and who helped them do it
Who said "America First"
and ok'd the yellow stars*

This poem is meant to incite, provoke, challenge and offend the sensibilities of the status quo. It is the role that art has historically played in our society. Mr. Baraka is an equal opportunity offender; there are choice passages in his poem that confront just about every group imaginable, including Blacks. And that is a healthy expression of art. It is not surprising, though, for Jewish groups to draw a line in the sand. Their interests are understandably invested and intertwined in the ongoing volatility of the Middle East and Israeli politics.

The real "controversy" here is that Mr. Baraka apparently did not know any better than to touch the "third rail" of Democratic politics. Simply questioning the motivations of the Israeli government has become a death sentence for Blacks. The demonization of Baraka comes upon the heels of congressional elections where two Black incumbents were defeated primarily due to their expressing support for Palestinian self-determination. Israel has now become the litmus or loyalty test

applied to Blacks in Democratic politics.

What is troubling is the manner in which Governor McGreevey has inserted himself into this matter, apparently at the behest of two prominent Jewish organizations. Did the governor read the poem prior to calling for Mr. Baraka's resignation? Did he ask to meet with Mr. Baraka to gain a better understanding of the poet's motivations? Did he exercise real leadership by bringing the leaders of the offended Jewish groups and Mr. Baraka to the table to discuss their differences over artistic interpretation?

If Governor McGreevey is taking a "zero tolerance" position on racism and anti-Semitism, as his aide suggests, his first order of business as governor should have been to demand the immediate resignation of Rutgers University President Francis Lawrence. The president's infamous comment regarding the intellectual capacity of Black students is a stain upon the state of New Jersey as well as an insult to the Rutgers community.

We know, as governor, Mr. McGreevey has no authority to remove Dr. Lawrence, as he has none to strip Mr. Baraka of his position. Still, he chose to flex his muscle and expend political capital in a very visible fashion against a noted Black social critic while choosing to engage in backroom Machiavellian politics against a white academician whose influence, I would argue, far exceeds Mr. Baraka. Neither course reflects well upon the governor's leadership credentials.

We appear to have entered an era of "minstrel politics", where so-called "New Democrats", use Blacks as foils to establish their neoconservative credentials. While at the same time using Black votes to maintain partisan advantage and political power. Mr. McGreevey's posturing is reminiscent of candidate Bill Clinton's public rebuke of hip-hop artist Sista Souljah. Like Clinton, McGreevey's condemnation of Mr. Baraka is politically calculated to demonstrate to Blacks his party's indifference toward them, hedging his bets that he has no reason to fear any backlash from a constituency that long ago surrendered its political leverage.

If this governor's motivation in asking Mr. Baraka to resign were truly sincere, Mr. McGreevey would do well to take account of his own behavior.

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