

## Public Occurrences 2.0 June 2008



**June 30, 2008**

### **The Age of Analogies**



[One of Josh Marshall's posts last week noted](#) the dismal failure of the Bush administration's attempt at a Radio Free Europe for the Arab world, al-Hurra ("The Free One.") Like most of the Shrub crew's schemes, this one was doubly incompetent, both erroneously conceived *and* poorly implemented. It was dopey enough to think that the situation in the present Middle East resembles Eastern Europe during the Cold War at all. Al-Hurra competes with a brace of widely-watched Arabic-language satellite channels and web sites while Radio Free Europe supplied peoples who were starved for outside information by their Communist state media monopolies. Then the dopey idea could not even be executed properly. The [men behind al-Hurra](#) turn out to be the news geniuses responsible for Casey Kasem's "American Top 40" and other syndicated national

radio programs. It seems that none of the managers knew Arabic or much of anything about the Arab news media, but the founder (Norman Pattiz) is, like Casey, a Lebanese-American, so people in D.C. must have assumed that was qualification enough.

This story crystallized for me something that is going to be an historical hallmark of the present era. In this Age of Analogies, with television chat shows defining the public sphere, we have American leaders not just using dumb historical analogies as cheap talking points, but actually trying to put the dumb analogies into practice, as the basis for policy. We can't just compare a foreign leader we don't like to Hitler, we have to take the approach toward the world's "bad guys" we think we would have taken towards Hitler, if we were time-travelling nincompoops from the 21st-century with 20-20 hindsight supplied by Hollywood. That is very close to what most of our current national leaders and pundits really seem to think they are.

So we have [the current debate over "appeasement,"](#) a word rolled out anytime someone suggests there might be some other way of dealing with regimes and peoples we don't like other than bombing, invading, and overthrowing them, not necessarily in that order. The appeasement concept was problematic even back in the Cold War when it was cultural gospel, taught at the deepest level possible, that every conflict was a case of handing Czechoslovakia and your manhood over to the Nazis, or standing up and fighting. Westerns, *Star Trek*, *The Brady Bunch* could all agree on that. Fight, or Hitler wins and millions die! Interestingly, the promise that Cold War popular culture often made was that if you stood up and showed you could fight, the Romulans or the bully or the outlaws would go away and leave you alone. In fact, when the Allies stood up to Hitler they had to fight history's greatest war machine for years, and millions still died. And that would have been the case even if the standing took place in 1938 rather than later.

But how much dumber is "appeasement," and the implicit Hitler-Chamberlain comparison, when there is no continent-sweeping dictator demanding that we let him have some defenseless country? Who would we appease even if we wanted to? How would we go about it? What could we give the Islamists that we haven't already? Pakistan and Iran aren't enough?

Of course, "appeasement" is raised to twist the debate, not advance it. In the Bush-Cheney worldview any solution not imposed by force on a weaker foe is inherently suspect; any other form of adjudication or discussion is idle chit-chat of a particularly dangerous kind. Making every enemy into Hitler, the guy we know for sure was a psychopath bent on world domination, stacks the deck in favor of the force-first point-of-view:

"Some seem to believe that we should negotiate with the terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them they have been wrong all along," Mr. Bush said, in a speech otherwise devoted to spotlighting Israel's friendship with the United States.

“We have an obligation,” he continued, “to call this what it is: the false comfort of appeasement, which has been repeatedly discredited by history.”

(Yes, thank God Ronald Reagan finally cut loose and let our military show those Soviets who was stronger, otherwise the Iron Curtain never would have fallen. Oh, wait. . . .) At any rate, the “appeasement” concept resonates very well with conservative hatred of egalitarianism and its suspicion of legal processes, but its universal application to real life is just a little lacking, considering that 99.9% of real conflicts actually do not end with the total defeat and suicide of the Big Bad. Really pretty much just that one. Not sure how to score the Pacific theater.



Munich and World War II have loomed over U.S. policy minds since the end of that war, but there is something particularly goofy and post-modern about way the analogies work today, when so few of the top policymakers or journalists have any first-hand experience that goes back earlier than the Kennedy era. The historical analogies are taken sooo literally, regardless of whether they are remotely applicable. So I saw *Newsweek* wondering from the airport newsstand a couple of weeks ago, “What Would Winston Do?” The [accompanying article](#) actually does a pretty reasonable job distinguishing past from present and puncturing some of the Munich myth, but that cover says the opposite, much more powerfully. In any case, Evan Thomas’s article seems to be one of many belated efforts to catch up with reality by the sort of pop-history-writing journo (like Tom Brokaw and Evan Thomas, among many others) who have worked so hard to build up the power of the World War II analogies.

P.S. Based on the quite good and relatively even-handed new museum at [the Churchill Memorial in Fulton, MO](#) (the site of the Iron Curtain speech), what Winston would have done is attack something.

**June 22, 2008**

**Popular Constitutionalism Illustrated**



Readers of my book, [The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic](#), may be interested in a much more lavishly illustrated rendition of some of the book's points that has been just been published in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's magazine [Pennsylvania Legacies](#). The article, "Popular Constitutionalism in Philadelphia: How Freedom of Expression Was Secured by Two Fearless Newspaper Editors," is part of a special issue on "Defining Civil Liberties in Pennsylvania." Naturally, the two editors are Benjamin Franklin Bache and William Duane of the Philadelphia *Aurora*. It looks like you have to join HSP to actually read the whole thing, but there is a preview available [here](#).

(I love the cartoon of a lightning-swathed printing press that the HSP has posted with the preview, which I am borrowing for this post. It looks like it should be the chest emblem of a printing-themed superhero, if there ever were to be such a thing.)

As usual with small assignments covering old ground, I tortured myself to put something new into this piece, only to have most of the extra material not make it into the final version. In this case, I tried to go a little further than the book did with the idea of popular constitutionalism – constitutional interpretation as worked out and enforced in the arena of popular politics rather than the courts – as the driving force behind what Americans came to see their constitutional rights. In the case at hand, the expansive American version of press freedom was worked out in the political battle of 1798-1801. Constitutional law and elite political thought only caught up many decades later. At any rate, I have posted a "director's cut" of the article [here](#). (Having an outlet for my long versions was a good chunk for my motivation for starting a website in the first place.) It is still unfootnoted and pitched to a relatively popular audience, like the *Pennsylvania Legacies* version, but it will be a starting point for an argument I hope to be making at greater length and with more scholarly rigor in the future.

## June 16, 2008

### Jefferson Whitewashers for Clinton and McCain

Thanks to reader Ben Carp for pointing out the following item from *The Politico* that needed to be mentioned in this space:

[Ben Smith's Blog: From Jeffersons vs. Hemingses to McCain vs. Obama](#)

A key organizer of John McCain's meeting Saturday with former supporters of Hillary Clinton is best known for her role in another bitter American fight: The effort by some white descendants of Thomas Jefferson to keep his possible African-American descendants out of family gatherings.

Paula Abeles emailed Politico yesterday to complain that her group had gotten short shrift in a blog item, writing, "I initiated the teleconference with McCain on Saturday and was solely responsible for the guest list." Another Clinton backer at the event, Will Bower, confirmed that she was "integral" to assembling the group.

But Abeles first made the news in 2003, when she and her husband, then-Monticello Association President Nat Abeles, led the fight to keep members of the Hemings family – descendants of Jefferson slave and, some historians believe, mistress Sally Hemmings – out of a gathering of the [Monticello Association](#), which is made up of lineal descendants of the third president.

Abeles drew national attention for her role in an episode of online espionage.

[The AP reported](#) in May of 2003:

The wife of a Thomas Jefferson family association official said Friday that she masqueraded as a 67-year-old black woman on an Internet chat room in a bid to keep descendants of a reputed Jefferson mistress out of this weekend's family reunion.

"It might have been somewhat unethical," said Paulie Abeles of Washington, D.C., who participated for eight months in the Yahoo! message board created for relatives of Jefferson slave Sally Hemings.

"It might have been childish, but I really think I was working in the best interest of the majority of the family members to make the reunion a calm and civilized gathering," she said.

The story goes on a bit from there. Many of *The Politico's* commenters made the

obvious point that this would seem to confirm what many Obama supporters have suspected about the racial views of some of Clinton's more diehard supporters. Abeles and her ilk probably don't think of themselves as racists, but their fury at the very idea of connecting African Americans with something they revere like the presidency or their own family heritage says it all.

Also, one correction to Smith's post is in order: the "some historians" are on the other foot. Perhaps people are just keeping quiet about it, but my sense is that the vast majority of historians (especially under age 60 or 70) now accept that Thomas Jefferson fathered some or all of Sally Heming's children. And not just scholars who are bent on trashing Jefferson.

The turning point for me personally was Annette Gordon-Reed's 1997 case history [\*Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy\*](#). In a very even-handed work written before the DNA testing, Gordon-Reed reached their conclusions by sifting carefully and logically through the then-available written records and the various arguments that had been made over the years. The clincher for me was the fact that Sally Hemings never conceived a child when Jefferson was not living on the same premises, during the height of his political career when he was away from home, and Sally, much of the time. The DNA testing just confirmed what already seemed very, very likely. Even [the modern-day custodians of the Jefferson legacy at Monticello](#) basically accept the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, if that is the term. Why some white Jefferson descendants cannot accept it, and why they would switch parties to support McCain, I leave to the reader to decide.

**June 10, 2008**

**Hamilton's house on its way to Jeffersonian setting**



I was amused by the [New York Times story](#) last weekend about Alexander Hamilton's country house, The Grange, getting moved "from its cramped site on Convent Avenue to an appropriately verdant new location a block away in St.

Nicholas Park, facing West 141st Street.” Andy Robertson and I visited that lonely site (in terms of tourists) a few years ago. The house was indeed challenging to find, crammed in behind an Episcopal Church and surrounded by other buildings. (In the picture above, you can see the portico of the Richardsonian-style church on the upper right.) We were the only people there except for one ranger, but we thought that the old site was actually rather *appropriate*. The Founder most devoted to economic development and high finance got his house completely overshadowed by the growth of exactly the sort of city he sought to foster, with all the sensitivity to the small, rural, and outmoded that such cities usually show. I am sure it is true that the new location will more closely replicate the house’s original setting, back when Harlem was a country village, but the old one sent a more accurate message about the what the historical figure stood for. Of course, the fact that Hamilton’s Monticello-like hilltop shrine will be created at public expense seems pretty Hamiltonian.

## June 7, 2008

### “Two Systems of Science” – Good one!

I did not work as a reporter for all that long, but I do remember the elation I felt when a “source” (as journalists like to call people they talk to on the phone) gave me a really awful, colorful quotation. The key was to find some exponent of a ridiculous or distasteful cause who liked to talk a little too much. I imagine the writer of the [recent New York Times story on the latest evolutionary leap of the anti-evolution cause](#) must have been pumping her fist in the air on the other end of the phone (or inwardly), when the head of the Texas state education board uncorked the following explanation of why it is perfectly appropriate to teach the evangelical Christian critique (a.k.a. “weaknesses”) of evolutionary theory in science classes:

Dr. [Don] McLeroy, the [Texas state education] board chairman, sees the debate as being between “two systems of science.” “You’ve got a creationist system and a naturalist system,” he said. . . .

Dr. McLeroy believes that Earth’s appearance is a recent geologic event – thousands of years old, not 4.5 billion. “I believe a lot of incredible things,” he said, “The most incredible thing I believe is the Christmas story. That little baby born in the manger was the god that created the universe.”

Believing incredible things – now that’s science. I imagine Dr. McLeroy is perfectly sincere about the “scientific” truth of his Christian beliefs. I have never been able to find a good book to read about this – please advise – but

American fundamentalism does seem to have this strange scientific streak. In literally interpreting the Bible, they believe one can find "the facts," the objectively, universally true principles of all existence. They even tend to use scientific, quasi-scholarly methods to get at the "real" meaning of the text.

At least this was how it was explained to me by a former graduate student who had attended a conservative Christian seminary. We were talking about the apparent contradiction between the belief in the transparent and complete inerrancy of the English-language biblical text and the requirement that students learn ancient languages in order to translate the originals. It seemed to me that anyone who had translated more than a few sentences of any foreign language, let alone ancient ones using a different alphabet, would twig to the gaps and multiple possibilities involved in the process. But if you think of translation as a quest for scientific fact, then perhaps that is less of a problem.

## June 4, 2008

### A Trip of Two Game-Show Hosts

Back to history (mostly), and back to blogging a little more regularly as I try to stay in the writing habit. Unfortunately, most of my bloggable thoughts are still back on the GeoBee trip.

Game-show hosts turned out to be one of the surprise sub-themes of the trip. We knew about Alex Trebek of *Jeopardy!* hosting the finals of the National Geographic Bee, but we were not expecting Isaac to get that far, nor that the finals would actually *be* a sort of game show, with a giant two-tiered set, desks with lights on the front, and the whole nine yards. From the looks of the set, I was worried that there might be buzzers and wrong answer sound effects, too, but luckily National Geographic did not take things quite that far. Alex Trebek seemed exactly like what you see on *Jeopardy!*, and very good with the kids. I haven't watched his show since sometime in the 90s, but as TV personalities go Alex seems like a credit to the culture. Canadian culture, perhaps, but a credit, a figure who honors knowledge and intelligence and a modest pride in one's accomplishments rather than exhibitionism, ruthlessness, and stupidity like 90% of the rest of TV.

The other game-show host came as more of a surprise. Karen and the boys had never been out to Presidential Shrine #1, a.k.a. Mount Vernon, so we spent the afternoon there on the way out to Karen's uncle's house out in suburbs. I had not been to Washington's pad in quite a while, and the place was much changed. The house was the same, but there is now a glitzy complex of ancillary museums



([The Ford Orientation Center](#) and [Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center](#)) that seem to be the result of a massive infusion of right-wing money, or at least money from rich people and corporations with quite conservative notions about patriotism and history.

In the new orientation center, visitors are ushered into a giant movie theater for a double-feature. First up, a cheery overview of the grounds featuring . . . *Wheel of Fortune* host Pat Sajak, in colonial costume! I must admit I did not see this coming. It is hard to imagine a less 18th-century or Washingtonian figure than Pat Sajak, especially when he takes off the tri-corner hat to reveal his trademark, blow-dried 1970s 'do. Even some of the other tourists chuckled a bit at the incongruousness of starting off their visit to a national shrine with a few words from the the guy on *Wheel of Fortune*. Pat's major qualification for the job would seem to be status as a token Hollywood conservative, as noted on this [roster of "Patriotic Actors"](#) from a conservative web site. Apparently Pat has contributed more than his hairdo and cheerful demeanor to the right-wing cause; on another conservative site, he enlightens us at some length on "[The Disconnect Between Hollywood and America.](#)"

Pat's participation in conservative Hollywood-bashing is interesting considering that his Mount Vernon intro is followed by a very Hollywood-esque "action-adventure movie" on Washington called [We Fight To Be Free](#). Written by token conservative screenwriter [Lionel Chetwynd](#) (author of the celebratory George W. Bush docudrama [DC 9/11: Time of Crisis](#)), the film turns Washington's life into a collection of near-cover versions of scenes from recent popular historical dramas. I suspect many non-historian visitors must get a little confused by the way preparations for the Battle of Trenton (complete with Washington giving a Bush-ian patriotic speech) are intercut with scenes from Braddock's Defeat that seem to exist so that a *Last of the Mohicans*-style battle scene could be included, complete with scalplings and dramatic rescues. It was George Washington, King of the Wild Frontier.

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