

The US media and the “Ten Commandments” controversy in Alabama

By David Walsh
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The treatment by the American media of the Christian fundamentalist protests in defense of Alabama chief justice Roy Moore and his installation of a Ten Commandments monument in Montgomery has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Moore’s installation of the monument, carried out in the dead of night in the summer of 2001, was a provocation against the US Constitution so blatant that his eight conservative fellow Alabama Supreme Court justices ruled unanimously against him. The 5,300-pound granite marker was removed August 27 from the Alabama Judicial Building on the order of a federal judge.

For weeks, the US media, in particular the television cable news networks, provided intense coverage of demonstrations in support of Moore that they acknowledged amounted to no more than “hundreds” of people, and, one suspects, often considerably less. MSNBC, CNN, Fox News Channel and the rest carried items 24 hours a day on the small band of fundamentalists in Alabama’s state capital marching, praying and shouting outside the court building.

Media pundits and talk-show hosts regularly refer to the California recall vote, with its 135 candidates, as a “circus.” Almost no one in the mainstream media has used this impolite term to describe the small mob of Christian fanatics in Montgomery holding up signs, for example, that read, “The wicked shall be turned into hell” and wearing T-shirts proclaiming “Homosexuality is a sin, Islam is a lie, abortion is murder.”

Moore’s refusal to remove the Ten Commandments display has rallied religious zealots from across the US. The media has treated their small protests as though they reflected the thoughts and feelings of the American “heartland.” The largest pro-Moore rally yet, involving national figures of the religious right such as James Dobson, attracted 1,500 to 2,500 people. The daily protests of hundreds of deluded individuals have been meticulously reported upon, whereas US and worldwide demonstrations of millions against the Bush administration’s war plans last February—the largest protests in world history—were barely

covered by the American media and the story quickly buried.

Moore is an implacable enemy of democratic rights who, in the spirit of Christian love, has threatened homosexuals with execution. The Alabama chief justice has denounced abortion rights and defended the program of “state’s rights,” the perennial slogan of Southern reactionaries. It was not for nothing that members of the pro-Confederacy League of the South showed up in Montgomery to show their support for Moore.

That this individual, a political figure in the tradition of segregationist governors George Wallace and Lester Maddox, Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond and others of this stripe, has become the darling of prominent sections of the political and media establishment testifies to the reactionary state of the political and media establishment in the US, as well as to its desperation. Moore has the open endorsement of the Republican majority in the House of Representatives. No official of the Bush administration, which has been waging its own war against the separation of church and state, has condemned him.

On August 25, the *Wall Street Journal*, one of the most prominent media outlets in the country, opened its editorial pages to Moore. In his comment, “In God I Trust,” the Alabama chief justice ignorantly argued that “no judge has the constitutional authority to forbid public officials from acknowledging the same God specifically mentioned in the charter documents of our nation, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.” The Constitution, which established the political framework of the new nation in 1789, is a thoroughly secular document that makes no mention of God whatsoever and declares, in the very first sentence of its First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

In a famous letter written in 1802, President Thomas Jefferson expanded on the intent of the First Amendment: “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or

prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.” The matter could hardly be clearer. Yet the media continues to treat Moore’s brazen promotion of Protestant theology in a public building as though it were a highly complex issue open to interpretation.

The erstwhile liberal press, notably the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, has slapped Moore on the wrist, citing his “embarrassing defiance of federal law” and personal “lust for power.” The general response of the media has been to treat Moore as a “man of God” who has perhaps overreached himself in his sincere zeal. CNN Headline News, for example, reports that Moore “stands firm,” while the sub-headline of an article on the *Time* magazine web site asks, “Has he gone too far?” The Murdoch outlets, such as Fox News, are friendly to Moore, with right-wing talk-show host Sean Hannity openly supporting his cause, while the slightly more urbane right-winger Brit Hume asks whether Moore has the “right idea” but the “wrong argument.”

The media has deliberately provided Moore’s “cause” with a degree of political and moral legitimacy. Reporters repeat with a straight face claims by his right-wing supporters that he stands in the traditions of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white man in a Montgomery bus in 1955. In defying a federal judge, Moore is clearly intending to remind inveterate racists of former governor Wallace’s action in 1963 when he stood in a University of Alabama doorway to block the court-ordered integration of that school. Moore is appealing to the same social forces.

Laura Sullivan in the *Baltimore Sun* (“Right finds a cause in Ala.”) writes that “The Ten Commandments movement is to the Christian right what abortion clinic protests were in the 1980s and early 1990s... While still fiercely anti-abortion, Christian right organizations have embraced the Ten Commandments as a way to re-emerge from a sense of growing obscurity and gain broader support.” Sullivan notes the presence of anti-abortionist maniac the Rev. Bob Schenck, who “made a name for himself during the anti-abortion fervor for wielding a fetus above his head at one rally,” among others in the Montgomery crowd.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Alabamans Quiet in Commandments Clamor,” notes that few residents of Montgomery have participated in the demonstrations. It appears that “outside agitators” have shown up again, this time for real—from a variety of fundamentalist congregations across the country. The *LA Times* article found varying degrees of verbal support or opposition. A *Mobile* (Ala.) *Register*-University of South Alabama survey found that half the respondents would disapprove of Moore’s action if

he defied a court order.

“Some Montgomery residents said they wished the whole matter would go away—one away or another. ‘I’m sick of it,’ said Cometric Blackman, a 26-year-old bank worker. ‘What’s it really going to change?’” Of more concern apparently is the state’s fiscal crisis and a statewide referendum on a proposed tax increase next month.

So then, why is the affair attracting so much media attention?

The background to the Moore affair and its disproportionate coverage by the media is the growing crisis of the Bush administration, in both domestic and foreign affairs. Polls for the first time suggest that more than half the population might not vote for Bush in 2004. One columnist argued recently that a “perfect storm”—with political, military and economic components—might be brewing for the present administration.

The Republican Party leadership has made a conscious decision to appeal to the most backward, ignorant and reactionary elements of the population, and use the so-called “cultural” issues (abortion, homosexuality, religion) to divert public attention from burning social questions—growing social inequality and poverty, lack of decent health care, the crisis in education, the bankruptcy of many state governments—and the deepening quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At his most recent press conference, Bush tossed raw meat to his extreme-right base, declaring his opposition to gay marriage and adding, “I think we ought to codify that one way or the other.” This was a calculated incitement of those who are denouncing the recent Supreme Court ruling against anti-sodomy laws and demanding a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriages.

Whatever its accidental features and origins, the controversy in Montgomery has been seized on by the ultra-right as a means of “shoring up the base” (i.e., the fascistic elements) in preparation for the 2004 elections.

And the US media has played its customary role in the Ten Commandments controversy, lending its resources and propaganda skills to the promotion of social reaction and the pollution of public consciousness.

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