

Ohio sheriff delivers reactionary tirade

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On May 10, the Sheriff of Hamilton County, Ohio—which includes Cincinnati—delivered a fascist tirade against “the forces of moral corruption,” at a public rally in the heart of the city’s downtown district. According to Sheriff Simon Leis, Jr., Cincinnati and police departments across the US are engaged in a battle against Satan and his minions—i.e., “liberal judges,” “atheists,” homosexuals, “feminists” and “liberals.”

Delivering the keynote address at the annual Police Memorial Day ceremony and parade at Fountain Square in downtown Cincinnati, Sheriff Leis denounced “proselytizing parasitic groups” like “gay and lesbian coalitions, rabid feminist groups, and the American Civil Liberties Union.” Leis’s backward, Christian fundamentalist-laced speech called on the return of “God and the Ten Commandments back [into] our schools and the workplace” to address America’s social problems.

Casting Christians as a beleaguered and persecuted minority, Sheriff Leis preached, “Our country is in great peril, not from an approaching army, but from a satanic pestilence that has already invaded our nation.” In fundamentalist Sheriff Leis’s xenophobic and patriarchal worldview, “our nation” consists primarily of “god fearing people...paying taxes and trusting public officials to run the daily business of their government in their best interest.” Excluded from “our nation” are the “deviates” and “depraved” that he feels it is his duty to protect “true Americans” from—i.e., homosexuals, “liberals,” non-Christians and atheists, etc.

Particular targets of Sheriff Leis’s harangue were youth, the working class, African-Americans and the poor, or what he termed “the criminal element.” He ranted against “a drug-infested culture [that is] littering our country and neighborhoods with untold corpses.” Sheriff Leis blamed past Supreme Court

decisions—upholding the rights of public school students not to be subjected to a state-sanctioned religion and state-sponsored religious observances—for high rates of teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, juvenile crime, teen suicide and depression among children. He said, “We stood by silently and watched atheists abolish school prayer and replace it with the all-too-familiar yellow crime scene tape, metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs.”

Leis’s speech ranged from alarmist and wildly inaccurate claims (such as, “Depression among children is up 1000 percent”) to outlandish theories whose cause-and-effect correlations collapse under the most minimal reflection (like blaming Supreme Court decisions “made in the 60s” for the spread of AIDS). Often the two viewpoints exist side-by-side.

For example, this comment by Leis: “Daily we learn of the mass killing of students in our schools, shootings taking place in day-care centers and places of worship. Is there any wonder why so many young people are committing such horrible crimes against innocent victims, when we protect the rights of atheists, and abolish the recognition of Almighty God in our classrooms?” It should be noted that while social conditions are indeed dire for poor and working class Americans, conditions have not yet degenerated to the point where mass killings of children in school have become a daily event.

Sheriff Leis’s speech follows close on the heels of Texas Republican and House Majority leader Tom DeLay’s incendiary comments following the death of Terri Schiavo, in which he openly endorsed violence against members of the judiciary. Taking his cue from DeLay, Leis ranted against “liberal judges, who wage tyrannical power against the citizens of this country.”

The Bush administration is deeply aligned with the Christian right, fomenting religious backwardness in an effort to crush resistance to its policies. Last month,

Republican Senate leader William Frist appeared on a nationwide telecast of Christian fundamentalists, in which all who opposed the Bush administration were labeled “anti-Christians.” In just the past few weeks, two separate Baptist churches in North Carolina made the national news: East Waynesville Baptist Church had expelled members who were known to be Democrats, and Danielstown Baptist Church put up a sign along a major route, which read, “The Koran needs to be flushed.”

It is especially noteworthy that Sheriff Leis’s speech was virtually ignored by the local print media, to say nothing of the national media. While the two local newspapers, the *Cincinnati Post* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, did not find his vitriolic diatribe newsworthy, the free “alternative” weekly *City Beat* carried a small piece, entitled, “The Gospel According to Simon Leis.” The article notes, “Leis turned the annual Police Memorial Day...into a virtual religious revival.”

Sheriff Leis is no stranger to controversy or national media exposure. Elected to serve as the Hamilton County prosecutor from 1971 to 1982, Leis gained national attention for his prosecution of *Hustler* magazine founder Larry Flynt on obscenity charges. From 1982 to 1987, he took the bench as a Hamilton County Common Pleas Court judge. Appointed as Sheriff of Hamilton County in 1987, Leis once again gained national notoriety in 1990 when he brought obscenity charges against the Contemporary Arts Center museum in Cincinnati for its exhibition of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s artwork.

The *City Beat* article interviewed Jay Twomey, a University of Cincinnati professor in the English department who teaches “Bible as Literature,” as well as other courses. Dr. Twomey discovered during his research that Sheriff Leis apparently plagiarized the bulk of his speech, lifting such lines as “satanic pestilence,” “rabid feminists,” and “perversion of the Internet” from a rant given by former Sheriff John McDougal of Lee County, Florida. Dr. Twomey says, “It’s quite troubling, isn’t it, that our local holier-than-thou defender of truth and freedom can’t even articulate his most fundamental perspectives without resorting to an especially petty form of theft and deceit, plagiarism?” [Sheriff McDougal’s speech can be found online [here:](http://www.geocities.com/athens/academy/9517/sheriff.htm) [http://www.geocities.com/athens/academy/9517/sheriff.](http://www.geocities.com/athens/academy/9517/sheriff.htm)

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I recently met with Dr. Twomey to discuss Sheriff Leis’s speech. He informed me that he had e-mailed queries to the editors of some newspapers in Ohio as well as major national papers such as the *New York Times*. In these letters, he described the details of Sheriff Leis’s speech, and inquired whether they would write an article about it. “I haven’t heard from any of them,” he told me. In light of Cincinnati’s recent police abuse problems and the race riots that have taken place over the years, he found this particularly surprising, especially since, as he said, “Leis’s speech would seem to target those very demographics that the Cincinnati police has historically antagonized.”

The Cincinnati area has a large working class population, and some of the most impoverished inner-city neighborhoods in America. In one recent study, only the Tampa Bay, Florida, area surpassed Cincinnati as having the largest economic disparity in the country. Between 1995 and 2001, 15 black males were killed by Cincinnati police. In April 2001, following the police murder of unarmed teenager Timothy Thomas, rioting broke out in several minority neighborhoods and the city was placed under a state of emergency. The next year, 41-year-old Nathaniel Jones was videotaped being beaten to death by six Cincinnati cops.

While city and state officials and corporate executives have promised to address the chronic police brutality and extreme poverty that plagues Cincinnati, economic conditions have continued to worsen. Since March 2001, Ohio has lost more than 200,000 jobs. Sheriff Leis’s speech can be seen as another provocation against the working class, and points to further police repression in the future.



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