Republican candidate Santorum attacks the First Amendment

Barry Grey
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It is only on rare occasions that politicians drop their smiling masks and reveal their real thoughts and feelings. One such revelatory moment occurred last Sunday when Rick Santorum, a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination, became increasingly agitated during an interview on network television and seemed on the verge of losing control.

He was responding to a question from George Stephanopoulos, the moderator of ABC's "This Week" program, about a previous remark that he "almost threw up" when he read the famous speech given by presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960 affirming the constitutional separation of church and state.

Santorum defended his statement, saying: "Because the first substantive line in the speech says, 'I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.' I don't believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute. The idea that the church can have no influence or no involvement in the operation of the state is absolutely antithetical to the objectives and visions of our country."

The near-hysteria with which Santorum denounced Kennedy—an assassinated US president—and railed against Kennedy's defense of a cornerstone of the democratic principles laid down in the Bill of Rights is indicative of his visceral hatred of the secular foundations of the American republic. He at one point called Kennedy's position "an absolutist doctrine that was abhorrent."

Santorum went on to turn Kennedy's speech on its head, claiming that Kennedy's plea for religious toleration and freedom was an attempt to oppress religious people. Kennedy, Santorum asserted, was the author of the "vision" of "someone who is now trying to tell people of faith that you will do what the government says… when people of faith, at least according to John Kennedy, have no role in the public square."

Neither the First Amendment nor Kennedy's defense of it suggests that religious people should be impeded from participating in politics. It does not curtail the right of people to their personal convictions. Rather, it denies the right of religious institutions to interfere in the policies and operations of the government.

Kennedy declared in his speech, given before a convention of Baptist ministers in Houston: "I believe in an America where…no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference… I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source—where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials…" (Kennedy's speech can be accessed here.)

Santorum supports the opposite. He is for the power of organized religion to dictate policy on a whole range of social issues, from birth control and abortion to education, the media and the arts. His outlook would lead to the imposition of religious tests for officeholders and a host of other anti-democratic measures. His views are far closer to the clerical fascism of the Franco dictatorship in Spain than the principles laid down by the US Constitution.

These positions, however, are only the most extreme expression of a general erosion of support for core civil liberties that extends to the Democratic Party as well as the Republican Party and the entire political and media establishment.

In the 2000 election, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman challenged the secular foundations of the Constitution, insisting that the First Amendment guaranteed freedom "of religion," not freedom "from religion."

The secularist principles articulated in the First Amendment are absolutely central to all of the rights proclaimed in the Bill of Rights. It is no accident that the founding fathers made the separation of church and state the first point in an article upholding freedom of speech and assembly. Representatives of the Enlightenment, they saw

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the destruction and carnage from the religious wars of prior generations as the outcome of the medieval domination of organized religion over civic life.

Thomas Jefferson called for a "wall of separation" between church and state. James Madison declared that, "there is not a shadow of right in the general government to intermeddle with religion." He famously opposed allowing "three pence" of public funds to be spent on religion.

No less reactionary were Santorum's statements in his "This Week" interview on education. He delivered a tirade against higher education for working class youth and a denunciation of universities as bastions of liberal and secular thought.

Defending his branding of Obama as a "snob" for urging youth to obtain at least one year of higher education or post-secondary school training, the former senator from Pennsylvania said: "... there are lots of people in this country that have no desire or no aspiration to go to college, because they have a different set of skills and desires and dreams that don't include college."

As Santorum knows full well, it is almost impossible to secure a decent-paying job today without some level of education or training beyond high school. He muttered a few words about technical schools and vocational training, ignoring the fact that funds for such programs have been drastically cut and that he is calling for even deeper reductions in all such programs.

He complained about "how liberal our colleges and universities are," with their "politically correct left doctrine," and promised to make sure that more "conservative principles" are "reflected in our college courses and with college professors."

Santorum, who insists that his own children be home-schooled, is a ferocious opponent of public education. In this field too he supports the domination of the church.

Kennedy, a Catholic, had to answer concerns that a Catholic president—for which there was no precedent in 1960—would be under the direct influence of the Catholic clergy. He ran for president at a time when there was still widespread anti-Catholic prejudice, combined with fear of the influence of the Papacy in American political life.

Kennedy provided a fairly principled defense of the separation of church and state, which at that time still enjoyed broad support within the political establishment. By no means a paragon of democracy, his administration combined appeals to idealism and democratic beliefs with a ruthless defense of the interests of American imperialism. Nevertheless, his administration a half-century ago represented an entirely different epoch from the present.

The intervening period has seen a relentless assault on democratic consciousness alongside attacks on the working class and the growth of social inequality. The entire political establishment has moved sharply to the right, with the Republicans seeking to cultivate a constituency among the most backward and reactionary sections of the population by pushing so-called "social issues" such as abortion, birth control and gay marriage.

The liberal and pseudo-left supporters of Obama and the Democrats—the *Nation* magazine and similar left-liberal publications, the International Socialist Organization—will undoubtedly use Santorum's broadside against democratic rights for the purpose of channeling popular opposition behind Obama's reelection campaign. The reality, however, is that neither Obama nor any other prominent Democrat and no candidate for president of either party would today unequivocally defend Kennedy's 1960 speech and the principles it articulated.

The attack on the separation of church and state is one part of a broader assault on democratic rights that has been intensified under Obama, including the repudiation of habeas corpus, the abandonment of the right of accused people to face their accusers and the general right to due process, the discarding of legal bans against torture, state assassinations and domestic spying.

The criminal character of the operations of the American ruling class—in the form of aggressive wars and the plundering of the national wealth by the financial oligarchy—has if anything become more naked under the current administration. The social chasm between rich and poor has increased, undermining any basis for democratic forms of rule.

Obama's own two-faced and capitulatory attitude to the assault by the church and the religious right on the rights of working people was demonstrated only a few weeks ago, when he reversed his policy requiring church-affiliated institutions to provide free access to contraceptives for their employees. This cave-in sets the stage for sweeping attacks on workers' rights on the pretext of religious conviction.

In announcing his capitulation, Obama said he was acting "as a citizen and a Christian." The fact that Obama, supposedly a constitutional lawyer, invoked his religion to justify his social policy demonstrates how completely the core principles of the Bill of Rights have become a dead letter within the political establishment.

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