

Crime, punishment and hypocrisy in the Penn State scandal

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There is a huge element of hypocrisy and self-serving sanctimony surrounding the announcement Monday by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) of severe sanctions against Pennsylvania State University for the cover-up of child sexual abuse involving longtime assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky.

Sandusky was convicted last month of multiple charges of sexual abuse involving ten boys, and the 68-year-old ex-coach will be in prison for the rest of his life. Head coach Joe Paterno was fired by Penn State after the scandal came to light. The 85-year-old Paterno died January 22 of cancer.

Penn State President Graham Spanier was also fired, and two other top officials, Athletic Director Tim Curley and campus police chief Gary Schultz, face criminal prosecution on charges they knew of allegations against Sandusky more than ten years ago and engaged in a cover-up.

The charges against Sandusky were undoubtedly warranted: his actions were those of a sexual predator, and his victims have a right to compensation and to see justice done in the case. Top officials like Paterno and Spanier deliberately suppressed reports of Sandusky's behavior in order to further the vast money-making operation known as Penn State football, in the process insuring that the victims would not receive the counseling they needed and that Sandusky himself would get no treatment for whatever disorder drove his behavior.

However, there are many reasons to question not only the action taken by the NCAA but also the motives behind the punishment. Little if any thought has been given to the impact of the sanctions on many local people who were wholly uninvolved and innocent of any wrongdoing.

Dozens of small businesses in State College, Pennsylvania—restaurants, motels, shops—will see their revenues slashed by the effective dismantling of the Penn State football program. This will raise area unemployment.

The cut in scholarships means that ten young athletes each year will lose the opportunity for a university education. The \$60 million fine on Penn State, while supposedly to be paid entirely out of athletic revenues, can hardly avoid affecting the overall functioning of a university already hit by repeated cuts in state funding.

The NCAA itself is hardly an impartial judge, let alone an innocent bystander in this sordid affair. One can be fairly certain that its decision was far less about "sending a message" than about protecting its own vast commercial interests in the profitable industry that is collegiate football.

In announcing the penalties on Penn State, NCAA President Mark Emmert invoked the need to "keep our eye on our values," adding, "Football will never again be placed ahead of educating, nurturing and protecting young people."

It is hard to top this as an example of sanctimonious claptrap. The "values" of collegiate and professional athletics consist entirely of dollar signs, and money always comes before the interests of young people.

The NCAA, presiding over the billion-dollar business of college athletics, regards the Penn State scandal primarily as a threat to its revenues, particularly the dollars of big advertisers and the television networks. The penalties against Penn State redound directly to the benefit of rival football factories—including Louisiana State University, where Emmert served as chancellor until two years ago. According to press reports, rival coaches are already sizing up Penn State football players who will be allowed to transfer without penalty

to other schools.

There are serious and significant issues raised by the events at Penn State, but to deal with them would require developing the discussion far beyond the actions of one psychologically disoriented coach. To explain why Penn State officials did nothing to stop the abuse of young boys would demand an explanation of the obsessive attention paid to collegiate and professional sports in the United States.

Sports play an important political and ideological role, both as a popular diversion from the deepening social antagonisms within the United States and as a means of promoting the militarism and violence that increasingly suffuse American culture.

There is another significant aspect of the response of the media and the authorities to the Penn State debacle. In this instance, the punishment is severe. An individual is being sent to jail. Others may face prosecution. Huge sanctions have been imposed against Penn State. But it is necessary to compare this response to the official reaction to crimes of a far greater magnitude committed by powerful state and corporate figures.

President George W. Bush took the United States into a war in Iraq on the basis of lies about weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda ties to Saddam Hussein. More than one million Iraqis and nearly 5,000 Americans lost their lives as a result, and Iraqi society was laid waste. Not a single US official has faced a war crimes prosecution as a result.

The response to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated criminal neglect by local, state and federal officials. No one was held accountable for contributing to the deaths of nearly 1,500 people along the Gulf coast, including more than one thousand in New Orleans, which was virtually destroyed by the flood.

Five years later, the same region was devastated by an entirely manmade catastrophe, the BP oil spill. Not one corporate official has been prosecuted, let alone sent to prison, for the worst environmental crime in American history.

The financial crash of 2008 has cost millions of jobs and caused untold social suffering in the US, Europe and throughout the world. No bankers or speculators have been prosecuted and no government officials held responsible. On the contrary, trillions of dollars were handed over to the banks to prevent their collapse, and

Wall Street profits, salaries and bonuses are back to record levels.

This is not to dismiss the appalling character of what happened at Penn State, both the abuse of children and the cover-up. But there is nothing more disgusting than when an establishment steeped in corruption, lies and criminality gets on its high horse to preach morality. Gentlemen, look in the mirror.

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