

**THE BLOG**

Bong Hits 4 Bush

By Marty Kaplan

06/27/2007 11:50 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Before everyone goes all misty-eyed about the courage it took for Indiana's Republican Senator Richard Lugar to express gentlemanly doubts about the surge — after all, he also said he had no intention of “voting with Democrats, particularly in their efforts to limit war funding or set a timetable for withdrawal” — look instead to Mari K. Oye, a high school senior from Wellesley, Massachusetts, who at the White House this week presented President Bush a handwritten letter, signed by her and 49 other Presidential Scholars, protesting his Administration's use of torture.

When these Presidential Scholars from all over the country met one another in Washington, they discovered how many of them felt so strongly about the issue, and about seizing the opportunity to be heard. As Leah Libresco, a Scholar from Mineola, Long Island, New York, said the next day on CNN, the view among many of them was that torture is a non-partisan issue: “I don't think this is a controversial issue. I don't think human dignity and human rights is a controversial issue, so once we started talking to people about the idea of speaking up, people kept coming forward and saying yes, this is important.”

So Mari and Leah and others drafted a thoughtful statement to hand to the President when it came time for their big moment with him in front of their parents and the press.

“We brought up some very specific points in the letter about the treatment of detainees, even those designated as enemy combatants,” Mari Oye told John Roberts, “and we strongly believe that all of these detainees should be treated, according to the principles of the Geneva Convention... I asked him to remove the signing statement attached to the anti-torture bill, which would have allowed presidential power to make exemptions to the ban on torture.”

Mari's own background — her grandparents were interned during World War II, simply for being Japanese-American — played a part in her views. So did something her mother, also a Presidential Scholar, told her: Ever since her own White House ceremony in 1968, she has regretted not saying something to Lyndon Johnson about the Vietnam war. “That's something that weighed heavy on my mind,” said Mari, “and I wanted to think about how we would feel 40 years from now if we had the opportunity to speak, and also the privilege to speak to the President of the United States, and to not use that privilege in order to make a difference.”

So the Scholars lined up for their photo-op. Bush arrived. According to Colin McSwiggen, a senior from Cincinnati, the President “said that it's important to treat others as you wish to be treated, and he said that we really need to think

about the choices that we make in our lives.” What a cue! “As he lined up to take the photo with us,” Colin continued, “Mari handed him the note, and said, ‘Mr. President, some of us have made a choice, and we want you to have this.’”

Bush took the letter, and he read it. How did he respond? “We agree. Americans do not use torture.” He tells the kids to treat others as you want to be treated yourself — the essence of the Geneva Conventions, which he and Cheney and Gonzales have contemptuously reconstrued as the Swiss Suggestions. The Bush family black sheep, who to this day evinces not a shred of intellectual curiosity, lectures these amazing students about the choices we make in our lives — and proceeds with no sense of embarrassment or cognitive dissonance to illustrate his own choices of deceit over honesty, propaganda over transparency, and contempt for the very Golden Rule to which he just paid pretty lip service.

Wait - it gets worse. He then uses these students as the human backdrop for a speech promoting the reauthorization and expansion of No Child Left Behind. Over and over, he says, “No Child Left Behind is working. In other words, we’re making good progress.” No matter that the some of the top Education Department officials once charged with implementing that Act have bailed on Bush now that they’re no longer in office, or that hundreds of Republicans on the Hill and around the country have declared that No Child — the single “accomplishment” that six years of Bush has delivered — has been a disaster. “It’s working” — like “we don’t use torture” — is Bush’s lie, and he’s sticking to it.

I wonder if Bush secretly wanted to waterboard these kids, who dared dissent from his policies. Or if not to torture them, at least to suspend them.

This same week, Bush’s Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. wrote a majority opinion saying that Joseph Frederick, then a high school senior in Juneau, Alaska, had no First Amendment right to unfurl a banner saying “Bong Hits 4 Jesus” across the street from his school. Joseph Frederick said he did it as a stunt to attract the news cameras covering the Olympic torch as it passed by, and he said that the words were lens-candy nonsense (you know, like “All your base are belong to us”). Justice Stevens, in his dissent, agreed: “This is a nonsense message, not advocacy” of illegal drug use.

But Chief Justice Roberts insisted that said that Juneau-Douglas High School had the right to suspend Joseph Frederick, because “the governmental interest in stopping student drug abuse ...allow[s] schools to restrict student expression that they reasonably regard as promoting illegal drug use.” Even if this were true, said the often perversely obtuse *Washington Post* editorial page, “Issues of drug use and drug policy are matters of serious contention. High school students must be able to debate them frankly — and that might even involve students taking the position that bong hits are not that bad.”

Despite the criminalization of dissent by the Bush Administration, its Court, and its courtiers, there’s something going on among young Americans. You can see it with Joseph Frederick, with the Presidential Scholars, with Jesse Lange, the Boulder, Colorado high school junior who — with aplomb, civility and absolute command of the facts — absolutely nailed Bill O’Reilly last week for lying about a sex-education class at his school. You can see it in this new *New York Times*/CBS News/MTV poll, which shows that majorities of Americans 17 to 29 want single-payer health care and believe that reducing global warming should be a top government priority. Seventy percent of them say the country is on the wrong track, and 77 percent of them “said they thought the votes of their generation would have a great bearing on who becomes the next president.”

I sure hope so. But hope is not a plan. Is there a need for anything more than these stories of outspoken young people, and these poll numbers about their generation, to warrant a flat-out effort to register 18-year-old in the country

to vote? Right now, there's an effort going on to do just that. It's a non-profit, non-partisan campaign called "Declare Yourself," and its Web site is DeclareYourself.org. Research shows that if people don't cast their first vote, when they're eligible as teenagers, it may not be until they're in their 30s that they go to the polls. But if they register and vote when they're 18, they're likely to be lifelong voters. I can't think of anything more important than making it as easy as possible for this generation coming up to get into the habit of citizenship. To echo Presidential Scholar Leah Libresco: registering 18-year-olds to vote shouldn't be a partisan issue, and it shouldn't be a controversial issue.

Just like human rights.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan

Do you have information you want to share with HuffPost? Here's how.



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director