

**THE BLOG**

Atheists for Cheney

By Marty Kaplan

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There's nothing like an apostate Democrat to gladden the heart of a Republican. From David Horowitz to Zell Miller, the I-was-blind-but-now-I-can-see caucus has given plenty of ammo to the right to demonize the left. But I wonder whether self-professed liberal Sam Harris's new attack — "liberals *are* soft on terrorism" — will make it into the RNC's I-told-you-so talking points. Harris, you see, was, and remains, an atheist.

Not just any atheist. His book *The End of Faith* was widely read, and widely praised for its courage. In it, he takes up a cudgel against religion that has been wielded from Euripides to Voltaire, from Freud to Karl Popper.

Now, on the eve of a new book, Harris says in a Los Angeles Times op-ed piece that liberals are incapable of recognizing the danger that Islam poses to "the future of civilization."

To support this, Harris — a fellow HuffPoster — offers three arguments against liberalism on a silver platter to the right. One of them is goofy; one exhumes a Republican straw man; and one is disturbing and very much worth wrestling with.

The wacky argument is that "liberal denial" of the danger of Islam "has found expression in a growing subculture of conspiracy theorists who believe that the atrocities of 9/11 were orchestrated by our own government." That's right: the "masochistic unreason" of those who think the Twin Towers were rigged with explosives is proof of the impact of liberalism.

Forget what Pat Robertson said about gay kissing and feminism causing 9/11; forget the historic American alliance between paranoia and the political right; ignore the legion of tinfoil hat-wearing trolls teeming online. No, says Harris, the nutballs' delusion, the reason this "phantasmagoria" exists, is "the debilitating dogma that lurks at the heart of liberalism."

What is that dogma? Here comes the hoary whipping boy. Liberals believe that "the powerless people of the Earth can be counted on to embrace reason and tolerance, if only given sufficient economic opportunities." This, of course, is the foreign version of the liberals-coddle-criminals argument.

Set aside the fact that for decades, Democrats have gone out of their way to immunize themselves against this charge by supporting astronomically expensive weapons systems (perhaps too far out of their way, given the pork, waste and

muscle-bound obsolescence of many of those systems), not to mention by building the biggest prison system on the planet. Set aside the bipartisan consensus since World War II that led to the World Bank and dozens of other economic development initiatives around the globe.

The real comedy is that these days, the economic opportunity argument for international stability is at the heart of the *Bush* freedom agenda. It's Republicans, not Democrats, who are justifying foreign adventures by claiming that providing hope and opportunity to people around the world will make them our friends; that "debilitating dogma" is the lynchpin of the *neoccons'* freedom = capitalism = security argument.

But there is one argument Harris makes that isn't easily dismissed. It begins with the idea that "what devout Muslims actually believe about the West, about paradise and about the ultimate ascendance of their faith" should terrify us, all of us, but that liberals are in denial of it. Don't dismiss Muslim extremism as a fringe, says Harris. The Islamic doctrines of martyrdom and jihad are of the essence of their religion, they're believed by tens of millions of people, they're sociopathic doctrines, and talk about religious diversity and tolerance is a criminally negligent response to the enemy we face.

Ironically, it's not just liberals who take pains to distinguish "good Islam" from bad. Even while putting the country on code red about the islamofascist caliphate that's coming, Bush has been careful to say that Islam is a great world tradition deserving of respect. And while Harris pays lip service to that point — "this is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims" — he also takes great pains to explain that the essence of devout Islam is "a cult of death."

In other words, says Harris, liberals are fooling themselves if they think that Islamic extremism, and its murderous antipathy to the west, is somehow an aberration; it is part and parcel of orthodox belief in that faith.

To be fair, Harris spends a paragraph on the dangers of "the religious lunatics of the West,... whose infatuation with biblical prophecy is nearly as stroubling as the ideology of our enemies." But at least the Christian right, he says, recognizes the danger of Islamic dogmatism; liberals live in an irrelevant fantasy world of pluralism and mutual respect.

Is there something inherently self-destructive about maintaining that different points of view, even warring religious points of view, can co-exist? Is it insane to focus on the highest common denominator of world faiths, rather than on the totalitarian premises of their doctrines? If religious pluralism was a good enough bulwark against tyranny in our Founders time, does the availability of weapons of mass destruction make own age fundamentally different?

It's funny: the right's most venerable argument against liberalism, from Whitaker Chambers to today, has been that it is secular, Godless, morally relativistic, incapable of recognizing evil when it sees it. Only a Christian nation (oops: Judeo-Christian — the right has its PC, too) has the moral authority and the confidence of its righteousness to vanquish our enemies.

But now here comes an atheist, saying that Godlessness is the best way to stave off the night. I have no doubt that Karl Rove and Ken Mehlman would be delighted to quote Sam Harris; maybe they will. I suppose they would have welcomed a testimonial from Madalyn Murray O'Hair, too, as long as she supported the Iraq war. But even if the GOP can finesse the secular thing, they're going to get into a whole heap o' trouble if they wield the Islamofascist brush as broadly as Harris does. Just ask Pope Benedict.

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