

Protagonist Corner

O. Benjamin Sparks, III

The Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia

About six weeks ago my wife and I were driving a Scottish friend through an historic neighborhood, when we were led to see through his outsider's eyes the folly of much that passes for public life in these United States. We drove by an elementary school on whose lawn was posted a sign that proclaimed: "This is a drug-free school." Our friend was amazed something so obviously naive was publically displayed; it merely invited skepticism. If there are no drugs in the school, one doesn't need to say so, and if there are, posting a sign mocks the authority of the principal and teachers whose responsibility is to ensure there are no drugs in the school in the first place!

That incident reminded me of a conversation at the beginning of the school year when a friend from another city told of his dismay at taking his first child to kindergarten and of seeing, placarded above the inside doors of the entry to that school, these words: "This is a gun-free school." It is horrible to contemplate that an elementary school should have to be designated gun-free; the sign, of course, accomplishes just what the sign about drugs does at the other school. Neither sign reassures anyone.

How did we arrive at this sorry impasse in our public life where schools must advertise that they are gun or drug free? Why wouldn't everyone assume, at least of elementary schools, that they are both, and that any attempt on the part of students (or even outsiders who might be hanging around) to change that status would be met with swift and sure punishment by those in authority? Add to that the tragi-comic cover of *The New Yorker* (first issue in September, 1993) which pictured children exiting from a traditional yellow school bus armed like guerrillas with bullet belts across their shoulders and automatic weapons in their hands. The cover title was "The Guns of September."

This is a frightening situation, not only because most people now avoid cities altogether, more and more afraid of violence against their persons, but also because of what these things reveal about the governance of schools, cities, and other institutions, both public and private. Who's in charge here? Or, why is there no one in charge?

Now granted we can blame racist, sexist policies of the past, and conjure up scores of stories about the illicit or illegitimate use of authority. Most of the readers of this journal can remember when government was the enemy, not only of those who were criminals, but also for the just and law-abiding, even the enemy of those who sought more justice. All with the support of the "white male (and female) establishment." But this can no longer excuse the levels of violence and criminality in our society, or the proliferation of private police forces and security guards, and the marketing of customized home security systems. The city where I live has "boasted" the nation's highest per capita murder rate for several years of the last decade. Many mornings I feel that I am waking up in some sloppily policed third-world dictatorship where the rich get protection, because they pay for it, and the poor get bullets—in their living rooms, their kitchens, and their hearts.

An additional factor is our perverse and demonic excitement about weapons: automatic, semi-automatic, and handguns, and up until recently, the inability of government to control their purchase and use. (Those who make laws cannot overcome their addiction to the profits of the National Rifle Association.) Aren't we developing a society that already makes Dodge City look orderly and genteel?

Now I know it is unfashionable to suggest that the Reformed tradition has anything much to offer anymore. Yet I cannot resist making another case for what we daughters and sons of John Calvin have, perhaps uniquely, to offer. I refer, of course, to our understanding of the role of the state, of the magistrate, of *government*. And I believe that clarity concerning that role is even more important in democratic, representative governments than in dictatorships. Without it, and without genuine, just public order being restored to institutions and cities, we may be headed for a repression that makes the worst case of the segregated South in 1951 look like a picnic.

We need to teach and preach that government is the gift of God for the protection of the weak and for the punishment (see Paul in Romans 13) of wrongdoers. Government, Paul reminds us, is no terror to good conduct, but to evil, which assumes that government bears the sword and uses it when necessary. The argument here is not for the proliferation of government, so that it sticks its nose into everyone's business, but for its authority (*the power* of governing authorities)—principals, teachers, police chiefs and officers, and elected officials who are determined that laws be enforced. After all, elected officials work for those who elected them, and employ persons to carry out measures for the common good. The primary "good of the commonwealth" which is sadly lacking just now is public safety, for in most cities, criminality reigns.

Now granted, John Calvin incipiently provided for the overthrow of just, idolatrous governors: those who served their own interests, those who were inordinately greedy and used their offices to line their own purses. But he also taught that the vocation of the magistrate exceeded even the calling of the Minister of the Word, because the work of a magistrate affects good for a greater number of people. To Calvin and his descendants, the work of principals and teachers, police chiefs and mayors, state legislators, and members of congress is a holy calling for which they are accountable to God.

Therefore as Reformed Christians we need to hold our elected officials accountable for what they are *not doing* in the maintenance of public safety, and oppose those who preach and teach that government is always wrong, or unnecessary. We must oppose those who want to distract government from accomplishing its right and proper functions. Otherwise we will sink deeper and deeper into the cynicism that prevails among so many of our citizens. This is not to say that we may place our hope in government; our hope is in God. But we do have a tradition that sees government as the gift of God, and thereby not just useful but absolutely essential to the human family.

The debate that ensued in Washington, D.C., over Mayor Sharon Pratt's call for the National Guard to give police protection to troubled neighborhoods in the District of Columbia has been as revealing as those signs in schools. It betrays a naive privilege that distorts our best efforts, even to think about the maintenance of public order. Mayor Pratt's request, no doubt with the concurrence of many poor people who live in hellish terror every night and day, is not even comprehended by those who rely on compliant, suburban police forces, expensive private security systems, or who live in condos or protected areas with their own guards. It is nothing short of disgusting to hear such people debate the constitutional rights (what a joke) of those who live in an armed camp without hope of safety. They have no rights, and are constantly dodging bullets in their neighborhoods. They are the victims of a pitifully tolerated anarchy which claims daily victims, most of them black and poor.

The exercise of authority, backed by force, is essential for the maintenance of ordinary human life, for teaching and learning, for marrying and raising children, for going back and forth to work in safety, for walking to the grocery, the drugstore, for

riding public transportation, for living in peace. Rulers have a sacred obligation to ensure that sort of safety, for they bear the sword precisely for that purpose. And the sooner they realize it, the sooner they know we expect it, the more quickly they will exercise the constitutional authority they have been appropriately given.

Let us preach and teach to that end. Granted this is no utopian vision, no liberating crescendo of a dramatic breaking in of the kingdom. It is rather the simple building of community, from which we derive not only justice, mercy, and peace, but all things necessary for a decent, safe life.

It's about time we lived, preached, and taught as though we understood our theological tradition at its best. And not cave in to anabaptist, individualistic notions of fragmented chaos in our public life. If we are faithful, maybe in twenty years the signs will come down from the schools.