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The Great Fence of America

by Jonathan Wilson

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The President recently signed a law providing for the installation of a 700 mile fence along the US-Mexican border. Some have analogized it to the Berlin Wall. I don't think the analogy is apt.

The Berlin Wall was constructed by the political powers to the east of it to keep folks from fleeing repression and lack of opportunity there. I'm old enough to remember it. The United States celebrated those who risked their lives to circumvent that wall. Those who failed were mourned. There was no talk of them violating the law of their countries or trying to enter West Germany illegally and without proper documentation. There was no outcry about excusing by amnesty those who succeeded. Their contributions to the economy, arts, and culture in West Germany were welcomed. Those contributions were valued and valuable.



JONATHAN WILSON

The *Fence*, by contrast, has been authorized by the government in the land of freedom and opportunity for the purpose of keeping out those striving for both. It's being built by a government whose number of working citizens is rapidly diminishing as Baby Boomers retire. It's being built by a government looking for reforms of the Social Security System because of the declining ratio of those receiving benefits to those paying into the system.

So what accounts for the disdain held toward the Berlin Wall and the Presidential support for the *Fence*? The obvious variables are language and skin pigmentation. Those on either side of the Berlin Wall shared both; those on the south side of the *Fence* share neither with the dwindling majority of American citizens. I'd venture to say that if there were similar pressure for immigration among English-speaking, Caucasian Canadians there wouldn't be a similar hue and cry. There almost certainly wouldn't be a similar fence along our northern border. The *Fence* is, pure and simply, a manifestation of racism dressed up in the rhetoric of righteous nationalism

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CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, January 5 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

Our guest speaker will be Charlie Wittmack, the first Iowan to climb Mount Everest.

- ▼ R.S.V.P. by Tuesday, January 2 to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com or 288-2500 by phone.

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and feigned allegiance to the rule of law.

The better analogy, but for the comparative modesty of the US undertaking, is the Great Wall of China. The Wall was built by the Chinese beginning in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) and continuing through the Ming Dynasty (1388-1644 CE). Bad ideas can be hard to kill. The Wall was, like the *Fence*, supposed to keep people out. Specifically, Mongol nomads. But those Chinese knew how to build a barrier. It extends for 1500 miles, sports walls 25 feet high that are 15-30 feet wide at the base, and from 9-12 feet wide at the top. At regular intervals, guard stations and watch towers were established. Despite the marvelous engineering feat, it failed. The Mongols just kept going around the damn thing.

Think about it — something the President and his now forfeited Republican majority in Congress seem not to have done very seriously. The *Fence* is to be 700 miles long; our border with Mexico is almost 2000 miles long. Besides that, it's just a measly fence and what, maybe 15 feet high at the most! I'm impressed by one new Congressman who said that his answer to a 15 foot fence would be a 16 foot LADDER, or a tunnel maybe. There're precedents for both. Recently they discovered a tunnel big enough to stand up in that, for an unknown period of time, had been giving US access to countless people right there at the official, "secure" border-crossing near San Diego.

I think we need to get a grip on a larger reality. I think the US-Mexican border and the undocumented workers flocking to get across it are a part of something bigger, and a physical barrier is a cosmetic and ultimately ineffective response. Like make-up for measles.

There are macro-economic forces at play involving huge disparities in the cost of labor. But for the illegal workers the disparity would be greater. The sheer numbers of undocumented workers has actually held down pressure for an increase in the minimum wage in this country; illegals will work for whatever and have to endure silently

less than ideal working conditions. That produces cheap help for the wealthy in this country. US companies can turn it into profits, and have, thanks to an almost complete lack of immigration law enforcement in this country. In 1999, during the Clinton Administration, there were, nation-wide, only 417 citations against US employers for hiring illegals; in 2004, under the law-and-order Bush Administration, there were THREE.

Where there is strong, unfettered demand, there will be supply. Like water incessantly finding its own level. And a measly *Fence*, great American or otherwise, won't stop those larger forces. The Chinese did a more masterful job pursuing the same bad idea, and it failed, except as a tourist attraction in modern times. The Great *Fence* of America doesn't even promise that long-term benefit.

—Jonathan Wilson

January Speaker to Feature First Iowan to Climb Mount Everest

On May 22, 2003, Charlie Wittmack became the first Iowan to reach the summit



of the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest. This achievement was the culmination of a seven-year project that took him on more than a dozen major expeditions to five continents, including many of the world's tallest and most dangerous peaks. The final summit attempt on Everest came after battling two months of the worst weather in the recorded history of the mountain, two failed summit attempts, a severe case of snow blindness, a day above 25,000 feet without supplemental oxygen, and three days of climbing without food or water.

While preparing for the climb Charlie and his team worked with thousands of students across the state of Iowa,

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enlisting them as members of their climbing team. Through their coursework, students trained with Charlie for the semester preceding the expedition and then participated in the climb through special projects that challenged them to solve the academic problems that arose during the three-month expedition.

Charlie has been honored for his work in challenging students and adults to identify and achieve the Everest Dreams in their lives. A few of these honors include the State of Iowa Executive Proclamation, awarded by Gov. Tom Vilsack; the Key to the City of Des Moines, awarded by Mayor Preston Daniels; and Senate Resolution 45, awarded by the State of Iowa General Assembly.

Since his epic adventure on Mount Everest, Charlie has become a distinguished graduate of the University of Iowa College of Law and has been a judicial clerk for the Honorable Robert W. Pratt in the United States Federal District Court. Today, Charlie is an attorney with the Davis Brown Law Firm in Des Moines and continues to pursue a life of high adventure. He is frequently heard telling stories of his greatest adventure — his marriage to Katie Scharf, and the recent purchase of their first house.

So, please sit back and relax as we take a trip to the top of the world! ▼

Rabbi Beryl Padorr Addresses December Meeting by Bruce Carr

December's guest speaker was Beryl Padorr, the new rabbi of Des Moines' Tifereth Israel Synagogue. Padorr, a mother of three who spent most of her pre-rabbinic life in Kansas City, came to Des Moines in June to serve the 300-plus families of the Conservative TI congregation. It was founded in Des Moines in 1901 and has worshiped and communed in its Byzantine-style synagogue on

Polk Boulevard since the early 1930s.

Padorr's presentation dealt mainly with her personal, professional, and spiritual journey to the rabbinate, starting in the 1950s and '60s when there was no such thing as a female rabbi. It never occurred to her. Her first degrees were in journalism and education, and she worked in publication and fundraising. By the time her children were in high school, there were such things as — a few — female rabbis: the first female Reform rabbi was ordained in 1972, and the first Conservative in 1985. (Such a thing as a female Orthodox rabbi is, of course, oxymoronic.)

She entered the graduate programs at The University of Judaism, eventually receiving her Masters in Education from the Fingerhut School of Education, a Masters in Rabbinics, a Bachelor of Literature in Hebrew Letters, and finally ordination from the Zeigler School of Rabbinic Studies. Padorr's stories of how she negotiated these male-dominated institutions and programs, as a simultaneous member of several minority groups (not only was she too female and too single, she was even too old), were every bit as appalling — and hilarious — to an audience of gay men as she intended them to be.

In conversation after her talk, Padorr noted that Conservative Judaism is making strides in the direction of complete inclusiveness toward gay and lesbian people and our issues — and as if in confirmation of that judgment, the *New York Times* a week later (December 7) published the news that “The highest legal body in Conservative Judaism, the centrist movement in worldwide Jewry, voted yesterday to allow the ordination of gay rabbis and the celebration of same-sex commitment ceremonies. The decision, which followed years of debate, was denounced by traditionalists in the movement as an indication that Conservative Judaism had abandoned its commitment to adhere to Jewish law, but celebrated by others as a long-awaited move toward full equality for gay people.”

—Bruce Carr



BOBBY

Starring

Anthony Hopkins,
Demi Moore, Sharon
Stone, Lindsay Lo-
han, Elijah Wood,
William H. Macy,
Helen Hunt, Christian Slater, Laurence Fishburne,
Freddy Rodriguez, Nick Cannon,
Shia LeBeouf, Brian Geraghty, Emilio Estevez &
Martin Sheen

Directed by Emilio Estevez

1Hr 51 Min

Bobby, the latest film from director Emilio Estevez, opens with the announcement of Robert Kennedy running for President of the United States. He said that he was “obliged to do all that I can” during the troubled times of the 1960s. The film segues to Robert Kennedy rising to calm the tempest following the Martin Luther King assassination in 1968, and then focuses on the culmination of the Presidential campaign that year, the California primary. It is an all-or-nothing primary, where the winner gets all California delegates to the national convention and gets the final big push before the convention in Chicago. It was the biggest prize of the primary season.

But this is really the background of the movie. The film primarily focuses on the last day of the primary and the anticipated big victory celebration to be held at the Ambassador Hotel that evening. Emilio Estevez’s movie examines the lives of those who were brought together on that fateful day at the Ambassador, the day of Kennedy’s assassination. But in examining these lives, Estevez is painting a portrait of a cross-section of America in 1968. There are those who work for the Ambassador: John Casey

(Anthony Hopkins), who had been the doorman at the Ambassador since 1928 and has greeted Presidents and Kings and movie stars, and his chess-playing friend, Nelson (Harry Belafonte). There are the Hispanic bellhops (Freddy Rodriguez & Jacob Vargas) who claim that in job pecking order, “We’re the new niggers, brother. Get used to it!” The film portrays their relationship with the proud black chef of the hotel (Laurence Fishburne); the hotel manager’s wife, Miriam (Sharon Stone) who is “hairstylist for the stars,” and the hotel manager (William H. Macy) who is standing up for the rights of the minority workers in the hotel. He is also having an affair with one of the hotel staff and has a subordinate manager he just fired because of racial prejudice (Christian Slater). There are the hotel guests: a senator and his wife (Martin Sheen and Helen Hunt); a former movie star, now an alcoholic lounge act performer (Demi Moore); and her once-skilled jazz drummer husband (played by the director, Estevez).

“The movie is a cross-section of America in 1968, and the writers have given the actors incredible dialogue dealing with significant issues of prejudice, infidelity, support of those in need, and aging.”

He has succumbed to being in the background while functioning as his wife’s gofer. Also there’s a newlywed couple getting married to keep the husband out of Vietnam (Lindsay Lohan & Iowa’s Elijah Wood). Finally there are those there for the Kennedy event, such as a couple of his campaign managers (Joshua Jackson and Nick Cannon), who dream of cabinet positions in the new Kennedy White House, and two young campaign workers (Shia LaBeouf and Brian Geraghty) who decide to take a break and drop a little acid that they get from a hippie dealer in the hotel (Iowa’s Ashton Kutcher). The movie is a cross-section of America in 1968, and the writers have given the actors incredible dialogue dealing with significant issues of prejudice, infidelity, support of those in need, and aging. The film moves at a fast pace until its fateful climax when all are thrown together in the horror of the assassination. It ends by playing a speech of Robert Kennedy on the need for all people

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of all races and creeds to live peacefully together because they must realize that “those who live with us are our brothers” and need to be respected. Those words ring as true today as they did then. America experienced a tremendous loss when Robert Kennedy was assassinated that evening. It is refreshing to hear politicians speak in long, thought-out sentences that inspire, rather than the sound-bite expressions of today. I often wonder how things might have been had Kennedy become President instead of Nixon. Enjoy the movie and revisit America in 1968.

—Gary Kaufman

From the Editor (Continued from page 6)

huge maces that symbolize Parliamentary power. The maces rest in the back of a Rolls, and they are so large that they stick out of the rear windows. More horse guards arrive in the Mall to escort the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in the Irish State Coach. They have left Buckingham Palace at 10:45 a.m. for the fifteen-minute ride to Parliament. The Queen is dressed to the nines in formal gown, furs, and glittering diamond tiara. Her coach is followed by other members of the Royal Family (including Princess Anne this year) in open landaus and in Rolls Royces. More horse guards bring up the rear of the procession.

When the Queen is safely arrived at Parliament, cannons are fired from Green Park next to Buckingham Palace to let the city know that she is at Westminster. Everything is timed to the minute, and the panoply of color and splendor is a sight not soon forgotten. Nobody does ceremony better than the British.

The State Opening ceremony itself is one based on tradition and has its peculiarities. For further information about the Queen’s speech, go to www.parliament.uk. It explains the entire process clearly and understandably.

—Steve Person

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the January 5 meeting by Tuesday, January 2 to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com or by phone at 288-2500.



“99 Lives 99 Voices – County Poems of Iowa” by John David (Jay) Thompson The work has a poem dedicated to each of Iowa’s 99 counties.

Jay will be reading from his latest book of poetry on Dec. 28th at the State Historical Building Auditorium at 7:30 pm in honor of Iowa’s 160th Birthday. This is his 5th book of poetry. He is a high school teacher and part time adjunct faculty member at DMACC.

The commemorative hardcover book will be available for sale and have a special seal acknowledging the reading and birthday event available only to guests that evening. Cost is \$29 with partial proceeds going to state-wide distribution of the book to each county-seat library.



Support FFBC Scholarships.

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One of the main missions and purposes of FFBC is to provide scholarships for high schools students who have worked to reduce homophobia in their school and/or community. Donations are the sole source of money to support these scholarships; membership dues are used to support the monthly meetings. Every dollar contributed beyond the membership dues helps support this worthy cause and is tax deductible!

Please consider making a tax deductible donation to the FFBC as part of your membership renewal. Thanks for your support!

FFBC

*First Friday
News & Views*

Des Moines, Iowa

JANUARY 2007

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From the Editor

Nobody Does It Better

I was in London in mid-November for a short vacation. While there, the State Opening of Parliament occurred. The key work here is “state” because nobody does state occasions better than the British.

The State Opening of Parliament is a curious event to those of us who are not British. Many Americans do not understand the role of the monarch in the United Kingdom. The Queen is the head of state, and all legal activity is done in her name. Most of us think of her as a mere figurehead which, in a way, she is. But she is much more than that. The English Constitution is not a written document as is ours. It operates on the basis of precedents, and a constitutional monarch is bound to follow the dictates of the elected Prime Minister. The Queen, however, reviews state papers and has “the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn” in the words of the nineteenth century constitutional historian Walter Bagehot. As Jerrold Packard states in his excellent book, **The Queen and Her Court**, “For a prime minister to ignore out of hand a warning or suggestion from the Queen would be unwise, and British politicians know it.”

Central London becomes a different city on the day of the State Opening of Parliament. The Mall leading to Buckingham Palace is closed to traffic and barriers are put up along the sidewalks. People gather behind the barriers for hours before the Queen’s procession to Westminster to deliver the Prime Minister’s speech in the House of Lords.

First, soldiers station themselves every twenty-five feet or so along the route for the Queen’s procession. Garbed in their gray military coats, spit-shined boots, and bearskin hats, the soldiers and police keep a watchful eye.

Next, military bands parade along the route playing stirring marches. They are followed by horse guards whose shining armor gleams in the morning sunlight. A coach appears, carrying only the Imperial State Crown mounted on a purple pillow for its ride to the Houses of Parliament. The Queen will don this crown before she enters the House of Lords to deliver the Government’s speech. The crown is followed by the

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