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Some Thoughts on an Easter to Remember

by Peter Doherty

Not to be partisan about the Elián Gonzáles episode, but what do you suppose the media reaction would have been if the president had been Ronald Reagan and the attorney general Ed Meese?

It isn't hard to guess. NPR would have rushed any academic pinhead willing to label the incident "fascist" to the microphone; Cokie Roberts' eyes would have bugged out; Dan Rather would have suspended his La Niña reports to cover the outrage; and Sam Donaldson's hair-piece would have flown straight up.

That is what the media would have done with Reagan and Meese, and it is what they should have done with Clinton and Reno. But they didn't and it makes me sick. Terrifying a small child seems to be OK in media land if it is your friends who do the terrifying.

But despite the fact I support the reunion of Elián and his father, the way it was done wasn't OK and here are a few reasons why:

First—the polls the media is touting be damned—the government lacked legal authority to snatch Elián. That isn't my opinion. It is the opinion of constitutional scholar and card-carrying liberal Laurence Tribe of Harvard University.

Second, Clinton lied to Florida U.S. Senator Bob Graham. Though maybe Bob should have known better than to believe him, the president told the senator no nighttime raid would be conducted and no force would be used. Graham used the president's word to calm the community.

Third, Janet Reno knew there was no legal authority for the raid and that her friend of 30 years, Miami lawyer Aaron Podhurst, and others were close to a breakthrough. But apparently Janet has come to believe that her oath of office, the niceties of constitutional law, and the desirability of peaceful outcomes are secondary when she can rule by the gun and the knock on the door in the night.

So what to make of it? Well, the fact Clinton lies is well-known. As for Reno, this episode has taken me straight past disappointment to disgust. She behaved no better than the stereotype of a gun-happy redneck sheriff. Come to think of it, though, a redneck sheriff might have shown more compassion and respect for the law.

In the short run, Clinton and Reno win, but in the long run I fear damage was done to Elián and to the Constitution during those three minutes of government thuggery in Miami. Both may be greater than we know.

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