

Nygaard Notes

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Amendment 4: A Big Win for Florida, for USA

It seems like a long time since the midterm elections of November 6th, but I want to mention one election result that was not only a major voting rights victory, but that also could have a profound effect on future elections in the U.S.

I'm talking about a ballot initiative in Florida called Amendment 4. This amendment, says the ACLU, "restores the voting rights of Floridians with felony convictions after they complete all terms of their sentence including parole or probation," with the exception of people convicted of murder or felony sex offenses.

Is this a big deal? Well, let me quote from a November 9th article in the British paper *The Economist*, which was headlined "Why the Restoration of Felons' Voting Rights in Florida Is a Big Deal." It said, "Amendment 4 restores voting rights to approximately 1.4 million [convicted felons] whose crimes have kept them away from the polls after they have served their sentences. The move means that the potential electorate in Florida will grow by about 10%, including more than 400,000 re-enfranchised African Americans. Because formerly incarcerated people tend to vote for Democratic candidates, the move could prove helpful to the party in close races."

Those who remember George W. Bush winning Florida by 537 votes in 2000 will understand how "helpful" those Democratic votes can be. The Fort Lauderdale paper the *Sun Sentinel* underlines the point: "Ultra-close contests are the rule in high-profile Florida races. Margins of victory in the last two governor's races and the last two presidential contests have been about 1 percent."

The Tampa Bay Times reports that 23.3% of black voters in Florida can't vote because of felony disenfranchisement. And that's no accident. The excellent Brennan Center for Justice supplies some crucial historical information:

"By linking voting rights to racist criminal laws known as the "Black Code" during the Reconstruction era, Florida's felony disenfranchisement law, written into the state's 1868 constitution, was originally intended to disenfranchise black citizens. That is exactly what it did, even 150 years later. Although black individuals make up just 14 percent of the citizen voting-age population in Florida, they constituted 42 percent of individuals released from prison between 2016 and 2017. Researchers have estimated that nearly one in four black males were permanently disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, compared to fewer than one in 10 white men."

Writing for the Capitol News Service, reporter Jake Stofan noted that being able to vote doesn't mean all the re-enfranchised will actually go to the polls. Stofan writes, "Political insiders, like GOP Strategist Mac Stipanovich, say the burden falls on the political parties to register them. 'You've got to reach them to get registered, then you've got to reach them to get them to vote,' said Stipanovich. Even if only a small fraction cast ballots, it could turn the tables in 2020. 'We're talking about a state wherein hotly-contested statewide races are often decided by 100,000 votes or less,' said Stipanovich. 'So, a pool of a potential 1.5 million votes is pretty significant.'"

It's so significant, in fact, that Republican Governor-Elect Ron DeSantis (who won by 33,000 votes) has gone on record as saying that the implementation of Amendment 4 should be delayed for an unspecified time. Other Florida Republicans are also trying to thwart the will of the voters by constructing obstacles to implementation of the new law. As it stands, ex-felons are supposed to be able to register starting this month (January 8th), and advocates are gearing up to register as many new voters as possible. The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, which led the organizing that put

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Greetings,

2018 was another year in which Nygaard Notes commented on a wide variety of issues: Deep Propaganda and the Wars on Terror and Drugs; Higher Education Privatization; Immigrants and Crime; Threats to the Food Stamp program; and a series I called Media Orientation in the Age of Trump. The final four issues of 2018 had me spelling out my list of Six Steps to Better Elections.

I do have one New Year's Resolution: I will not discuss what is coming up in Nygaard Notes. I have a habit of saying things like, "I'll discuss X, Y, and Z in the next Nygaard Notes." Then something more important presents itself, I pre-empt my planned article, then I never get back to it. Promises, promises! So I resolve to stop trying to predict anything. Instead I'll just try to enjoy producing the quirky, challenging, provocative newsletter to which you are accustomed.

I want to offer a special thanks to all of you who made a Pledge of support to the Notes during the past year. Your generosity made 2018—the year that Nygaard Notes celebrated its 20th year of publication!—the most financially successful year yet. And we're still going strong! Happy 2019 to all of you!

Gratefully yours,
Nygaard

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Amendment 4 on the ballot, is among the groups working to put flesh on the bones as Florida moves into the new era.

Given the importance that Florida—with its 29 electoral votes—wields in the election of the U.S. President, the passage of Amendment 4 may be one of the most important outcomes of the midterm elections. Consider: If Amendment 4 had passed 20 years ago, George W. Bush would never have been President. We'll see how Florida votes in a couple of years. I'm betting that the newly re-enfranchised voters will have a big effect, providing more evidence that anti-racist organizing—and make no mistake, anti-racist organizing was a big part of the campaign to pass Amendment 4—benefits all of us by making our system more inclusive, more fair, more democratic.

A victory, for sure, but the fact that it took 150 years to correct this remnant of Jim Crow racism shows how far we have to go. But for now all I can say is: Get out the vote, Florida! ♦

R.I.P. William Blum

A singular voice for justice left us on December 9th when author, historian and activist William Blum passed away after a serious fall in his apartment in October. He was 85 years old.

Nygaard Notes readers may recognize the name, as I've cited his work often, maybe more often than any other source. (Although I don't keep track of such trivia.)

My most recent Blum citation was just a couple of months ago, in NN #632, when I highlighted an excerpt from his excellent blog *The Anti-Empire Report*. Here's that excerpt, which gives a hint of how his mind worked:

"Even if you assumed that all the charges made about 'Russia interfering in the elections' were true, and put them all together, they still wouldn't have a fraction of the impact on the 2016 elections as did Republicans in several states by disenfranchising likely Democratic voters (blacks, poor, students, people in largely Democratic districts), by purging state voting lists."

His ability to add perspective like that to the headlines of the day made me a faithful reader of his blog. But there are a lot of good blogs out there; what really made him unique was the books he published about U.S. imperialism in the post-WWII period. ↗↗↗

→→ I've often said that the best way to understand how an empire (or any institution) works is to study what it does when no one is looking. Therefore, I eagerly read Blum's 1986 book, *"The CIA, A Forgotten History: US Global Interventions Since World War 2."* It's a virtual catalog of things the post-war USA has done while it thought no one was looking. In fact, I consulted *Forgotten History* so much that I wore it out. It literally fell apart! Fortunately, Blum published two revised and expanded versions of *Forgotten History*, in 1995 and 2004, under the title *"Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II."* The 2004 edition remains on my bookshelf to the present.

All the versions contain a comprehensive list of the numerous times when the United States—sometimes covertly, sometimes in plain sight—has intervened in other countries in its quest to shape the world according to perceived U.S. "interests."

Each of *Killing Hope's* 55 chapters is devoted to a specific U.S. intervention, ranging from (relatively) well-known ones such as Chile, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and Nicaragua to many not-well-known ones such as Suriname, The Seychelles, British Guiana, Greece, Italy, China and the U.S.S.R. Blum published the full list on his website in a post called "Overthrowing Other People's Governments: The Master List"

<http://williamblum.org/essays/read/overthrowing-other-peoples-governments-the-master-list>

Blum followed up on *Killing Hope* with the publication in 2005 of his book *"Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower."* Here Blum explores some of the ramifications of his research, with chapters like "Why Do Terrorists Keep Picking on the United States?", "Assassinations", "Eavesdropping on the Planet", and "Perverting Elections."

If you want to read a copy of *Rogue State* for free, you can find a complete PDF on the website of the CIA:

https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/5F/5FC9177D115DFAE199E5204183A6F3E2_Rogue_state__By_sout_al_khilafah.pdf

On December 22nd the New York Times ran an article headlined "In a Flash, U.S. Military Policy Turns Inward and Echoes Across the Globe," in which senior reporter Helene Cooper discussed Trump's decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and Afghanistan. She doesn't like the pulling back, or retrenchment, as it looks to her as if "17 years of American military policy was thrown out the window."

It was her eighth paragraph that made me think of Bill Blum. Indeed, it made me wish that I could hand a copy of *Killing Hope* to Ms. Cooper. Here is her eighth paragraph:

"The notion of retrenchment rankled American service members who are used to the idea of an activist United States military that promotes freedom and democracy and protects the weak around the world."

The paper version of the Times called the U.S. military "activist." The online version called it "proactive." The childlike belief in a virtuous military machine is the same either way. The whole article is worth reading, as it is a good example of how one can be anti-Trump and still be blinded by the tenacious patriotism that grows in the soil of the U.S. propaganda system.

It was the life work of William Blum to help inoculate the U.S. public against just such propagandistic mythology.

And here I will reprint the Nygaard Notes "Quote" of the Week from issue #399 in 2008. It's a comment by Blum from *The Anti-Empire Report*, and it's just as relevant and timely today as it was then. Blum said:

"I think there are all kinds of intelligence in this world: musical, scientific, mathematical, artistic, academic, literary, mechanical, and so on. Then there's political intelligence, which I would define as the ability to see through the bullshit which the leaders and politicians of every society, past, present and future, feed their citizens from birth on to win elections and assure continuance of the prevailing ideology."

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Blum *from page 3*

“This is why it's so important for all of us to continue ‘preaching to the choir’ and ‘preaching to the converted.’ That's what speakers and writers and other activists are often scoffed at for doing—saying the same old thing to the same old people, just spinning their wheels. But long experience as speaker, writer and activist in the area of foreign policy tells me it just ain't so. From the questions and comments I regularly get from my audiences, via email and in person, and from other people's audiences as well, I can plainly see that there are numerous significant information gaps and misconceptions in the choir's thinking, often leaving them unable to see through the newest government lie or propaganda trick; they're unknowing or forgetful of what happened in the past that illuminates the present; knowing the facts but unable to apply them at the appropriate moment; vulnerable to being led astray by the next person who offers a specious argument that opposes what they currently believe, or think they believe. The choir needs to be frequently reminded and enlightened.

“In sum, even when the hearts of the chorus may be in the right place, their heads still need working on, on a recurring basis. And in any event, very few people are actually born into the choir; they achieve choir membership only after being preached to, multiple times.”

In these days of alternative facts and the epidemic of cynicism that follows from them, we would all do well to read, or re-read, the work of William Blum. May his legacy live on in our efforts to build a powerful choir that sings the truth. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“Our Enduring Commitment to Principled Conduct”*

On New Year's Day former Republican presidential candidate and now U.S. Senator Mitt Romney published an opinion piece in the Washington Post that criticized the character of Donald Trump.

Fellow Republicans were mostly outraged at “Romney's scathing Trump critique,” but I thought that the most interesting comment in Romney's piece was this one, which I hereby elevate to the status of Nygaard Notes “Quote” of the Week:

“America has long been looked to for leadership. Our economic and military strength was part of that, of course, but our enduring commitment to principled conduct in foreign relations, and to the rights of all people to freedom and equal justice, was even more esteemed.”

The construction and maintenance of such mythology is not limited to Republican “moderates” (like Romney), as I point out in this issue's remembrance of the late William Blum. But those who, like Romney, long for the “good old days” before Donald Trump would do well to brush up on their history.

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