



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

JACK M. MARTINS April 17, 2013

| ISSUE: **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

| COMMITTEE: **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Stupid is as Stupid Does

Hands down, one of my favorite movies of all time is Forrest Gump and it popularized what I believe to be one of the most concise nuggets of wisdom ever: “Stupid is as stupid does.” It basically means that people’s actions are a pretty good measure of their intelligence. Even when there are those widely considered to be intelligent, if they regularly do stupid things, it’s better than even money that they’re not that bright.

I thought this insight on perfect display this past week as I read about the high school English teacher in Albany who asked his students to pretend they were Jew-hating Nazis for a writing assignment. His foolishness may only be matched this year by the Manhattan teacher who gave fourth-graders math problems based on how many daily whippings a slave received or the Georgia educators who were teaching elementary school division using the number of beatings per day abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass received.

This latest instructor had been reviewing the notorious Nazi propaganda machine and decided the best way to teach the subject would be to let his students take a stab at it themselves. He gave three entire classes of 10th-grade students a persuasive writing

assignment to demonstrate how Nazis showed their loyalty to the Third Reich and more precisely, what their frame of mind was prior to the start of the World War II.

The assignment is quoted as instructing, "You need to pretend that I am a member of the government in Nazi Germany, and you are being challenged to consider that you are loyal to the Nazis by writing an essay convincing me that Jews are evil and the source of our problems." Anyone who has ever studied history knows that this is indeed what Nazis brainwashed everyday Germans into believing, and that more than 6 million innocents lost their lives because of it. And if you are even a casual consumer of news, you also know that much of the world's current unrest stems from the fact that this ignorance is still alive and well in some parts.

Given these realities, why would any "intelligent" person be so insensitive as to give this assignment? Was there no other possible lesson wrap-up?

We already know how the actions will be explained away. We'll hear that we shouldn't sugarcoat what happened and that the best way to explain the phenomenon of propaganda is to see it first-hand. But if you really want to leave off any sugarcoating, this instructor is either an anti-Semite who tried to sneak his ideology into their heads under the cloak of curriculum or he has such completely poor judgment that he truly didn't understand that this was wrong. In either case he definitely shouldn't be teaching our children. And in either case he shouldn't be collecting a taxpayer funded salary. As a footnote as of this writing, he has not yet apologized, although he has been put on leave, and unfortunately still draws a salary. In fact, the teacher has yet to be identified.

And therein may rest the history lesson: that in tolerating something we know to be wrong for the sake of political correctness, in casually brushing it aside as innocuous, we lull ourselves into complacency. Time and again, that complacency has proven itself a breeding

ground for bad ideas that quickly become widespread.

And while I acknowledge that people are absolutely free to embrace whatever questionable philosophy they want, we certainly don't have to help them spread it to our children.

Fighting the horrors of Nazism was our forebears' work; guarding against it ever happening again is ours.

The good news here is that about a third of the students flat-out refused to carry out the assignment and a few even had the good sense to inform their parents. Even at an otherwise inexperienced age, these young people realized, "Stupid is as stupid does."

And in that lesson, we have hope.