

# Meaning of the War Over Christmas

**From the Archive:** It's Christmastime again, so just as families pull their tree ornaments and lawn decorations out of storage, Fox News and other right-wing media outlets dust off their annual outrage over the so-called "war on Christmas," which is just as phony now as it was when Robert Parry addressed the topic in 2005.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Dec. 11, 2005)

You have to hand it to political operatives who can turn the Christmas celebration of Jesus's birth into a nasty wedge issue, transforming a traditional message of love, peace and tolerance into one of anger, conflict and resentment.

The success of the American Right in extracting a "war on Christmas" out of a few well-meaning gestures to non-Christians, such as using the greeting "Happy Holidays," is a testament to the investment conservatives have made in media over three decades.

With their vertically integrated media apparatus from newspapers and magazines, to TV and radio, to books and the Internet the Right now can take a few scattered anecdotes on almost any topic and heat them up into a hot-button issue.

This "perception management" capability is now so powerful that even the most absurd notions can be made convincing to millions of Americans, such as the idea that despite the ubiquitous Christmas displays throughout the United States from before Thanksgiving to after Dec. 25 Christmas is under assault.

While an outsider arriving in the United States might see a nation celebrating Christmas with an unrivaled intensity and extravagance, the Right's media has created another world for its followers where Christians are persecuted for celebrating their faith, where they are repressed by cruel non-Christians and evil secularists.

This perceived persecution exists even as America's downtowns and shopping malls are bedecked with the red-and-green Christmas colors and Christmas symbols are everywhere, even in cities like New York with large populations of Jews and Muslims.

## **Christmas Carols**

Somehow, listeners to Fox News and right-wing talk radio are convinced that

Christmas is threatened despite the fact that Christmas carols are pumped into nearly all public places, including elevators and grocery stores where both Christians and non-Christians must go. Some radio stations, like the one played in the Arlington, Virginia, coffee shop where I often go to write, have been playing Christmas carols since before Thanksgiving.

When I bought stamps the other day (in 2005) from a U.S. Postal Service vending machine, I had expected to get the usual "American flag" stamps, but instead ended up with "Santa Claus" stamps. The USPS Web site also sold a "Dear Santa" CD, which includes Nat King Cole's "The Christmas Song" and Vonzell Solomon's "O Come All Ye Faithful," with a cross-marketing deal for a Fox "Dear Santa" special.

Still, one of the complaints heard from conservative Christians was that the post office didn't offer a new "Madonna and Child" stamp (though you could still get the version produced in 2004).

Another major beef from conservative Christians is that the federal courts have restricted displays of the baby Jesus in the manger on government property and that public schools have replaced "Christmas concerts" with "winter concerts" and the "Christmas vacation" with a "winter vacation."

Nevertheless, schools are closed for about two weeks to accommodate Americans wishing to celebrate Christmas. Despite the U.S. principle of separation of church and state, Christmas remains an official federal holiday, an exception to the rule that is afforded no other religious observance. Jews, for instance, don't expect Christians to honor Yom Kippur by taking the day off, nor do Muslims expect the government to show undue deference to Ramadan.

### **'Liberal Plot'**

Our hypothetical outsider might see the American reality as one in which all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, are expected to join in the celebration of Christmas. But that is not the impression one would get from watching Fox News, reading conservative blogs or listening to right-wing talk radio.

Within the Right's media world, conservative Americans learn how the "liberals" and the American Civil Liberties Union are "anti-Christian" and out to deny American Christians their right to observe Christmas as they see fit.

Fox News anchor John Gibson made this case in his book, *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought*. The "war on Christmas" theme became a centerpiece of Bill O'Reilly's rants on Fox, a message that then resonated through the Right's echo chamber.

In 2005, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, some conservative Christians boycotted stores that offered their customers the non-sectarian greeting of "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." In some cases, "Merry Christmas" is now spit out as fighting words, much as conservatives emphasize the words "under God" during the Pledge of Allegiance.

Falwell vowed to sue "everybody who tries to inhibit the liberties of our children and our families from worshipping and honoring the Lord, as we in America are constitutionally allowed to do."

But there is a larger message in this trumped-up "war on Christmas." It is how the Right's powerful news media can shape American perceptions to such a degree that a dominant group like American Christians can be made to see themselves as powerless victims, even over trivial grievances like saying "Happy Holidays." [For details on the Right's media power, see Robert Parry's Secrecy & Privilege or Lost History.]

### **'Victims'**

While conservative commentators often accuse African-Americans and other minorities of wallowing in their "victimhood," the Right's media has learned the political power that comes from letting white men, for instance, take on the mantle of "victim."

In the 1990s, a powerful conservative theme was the complaint against "political correctness," which often came down to universities and other institutions applying clumsy restrictions against young white men shouting the n-word at African-Americans or using other offensive language.

Though American white men collectively are arguably the most privileged group on earth, the "political correctness" theme allowed them to bathe in the self-pity of their "victimhood." It allowed them to get righteous and angry against their supposed persecutors.

There is, of course, a danger whenever a powerful group begins to view itself as the victim, because their real power allows these *ersatz* oppressed to inflict far greater harm on their enemies than could a group without power.

Historically, the world has seen this phenomenon many times, for instance, when Christians in Europe persuaded themselves that they were at the mercy of cunning Jews. Many of the continent's anti-Jewish pogroms were conducted by Christians convinced that they were simply defending their way of life, that they were the real victims.

Now, the United States is witnessing a similar exploitation of Christian fears

and the fanning of Christian anger. The “war on Christmas” theme is one manifestation of this growing chip on the shoulder.

The Right has learned well how it can deploy its powerful media to make even the most ludicrous notion seem real both frightening and infuriating to millions of Americans.

**[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry’s *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]**

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.

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