

Reason and Respect

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Spring 2005*

Article 5

1-22-2008

Beantown Baptism in the "free speech' zone

Will Sandler
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr>

Recommended Citation

Sandler, Will (2005) "Beantown Baptism in the "free speech' zone," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol1/iss1/5>

Copyright ©1-22-2008 by the authors
Reason and Respect is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.



Beantown Baptism in the "Free Speech" Zone

Will Sandler
Junior, Political Science

Last summer, I had the distinct pleasure of attending the Democratic National Convention in Boston. I've only become interested in politics less than two years ago. I am constantly playing "catch up" and the "name game" with an almost limitless cast of characters. My knowledge is by no means as comprehensive as I would like it to be. What I did know going into it is that many Americans have become louder, angrier, and less informed in their opinions than ever before. Though showmanship has long been a part of democratic practice, today it is nearly impossible to know where civic duty begins and cheap sensationalism ends. But I got a clearer sense of the boundary between the two in a baptismal shower, a baptism that ironically became my own.

Despite my pleasure at being a part of history in the making, the one thing I did not like at the Democratic Convention (aside from the six dollar slices of pizza) was the "free speech zones." Protesters were segregated from the convention center and allowed only to demonstrate under the bridge by the Fleet Center. With the iron sky, the Big Dig rubble and dirt, these designated zones looked like a bombed out city. But my dislike didn't stop me from walking in to watch the protesters—after all, I was trying to educate myself about how democracy operates.

Before I saw them, I most definitely heard them. Echoing off metal, the hooded figures protesting Abu Ghraib, past the 15 foot inflatable Ghandi statue, stood what appeared to be a family on a small soap box. Holding signs that looked like female anthropomorphic pigs kissing (and effeminate wolves holding hands), they protested gay marriage. Their voices were so loud I could barely make out what they were saying. The organization, God Hates Fags, probably expected a little bit of opposition in the city of Boston and the state of Massachusetts (whose last conservative act was kicking out free-thinking Roger Williams). The other signs proclaiming that "9/11 was a gift from God" probably did not endear them to the crowd either.

Indeed, these groups were surrounded by protest-protesters, who were angrier than they were. As the protest-protesters tried to shout them down, the protesters shouted louder—it just went back and forth. Both sides really did not care what the other side had to say. More focused on hating each other than on the issues, they merely reacted to each other's taunts. In my own act of protest, I sprayed the "God Hates Fags" people with the contents of my water bottle and immediately ran away, hoping not to be apprehended by the police, who surrounded all of us.

I was feeling pretty good about myself until someone asked me why I did what I did. I realized that I had made a mistake. I did not treat these people, who I so very much disagreed with, as my equal. I made the decision that my free speech trumped theirs, so I assaulted them with 100% pure carbonated spring water.

Though I passionately believe those people are wrong, it was wrong of me to disrupt their free speech. Because one thing I have learned since I became interested in politics is that democratic practice depends on civil discourse. And as impossible as it may seem to respectfully disagree with one another anymore, in the long run an intelligent word will always be more effective than a whole book of insults, or a whole bottle of water.