

Anti-Defamation League “Man of Achievement Award”
November 23, 2009 – Indianapolis, IN
Transcribed from extemporaneous remarks

Gerry Bepko has been a superb performer in a whole host of occupations, as Mickey laid out for you. I can testify, perhaps uniquely in this room, that as great as he was in all those other pursuits, he could not have been more talented, or expert, or productive than he was as a professor of contract law back in 1970. A lot of us believed that we had never had, or never again would have, a better classroom teacher than Professor Bepko. Or, as my seatmate called him, “Sergeant Bilko.” [Laughter]

I am grateful to the presenters Mickey assembled. There is a common denominator here other than comedic brilliance, and that is that each of these four people, if you didn’t notice this, suspended spectacular careers in the private sector and other walks of life in order to give of themselves to public life in this state. Anything good that has happened in the last five years is entirely due to those people who have stepped forward, and no better examples are available than these. As we all know, nothing of consequence for the good ever happens in this world because of one person, only when through some good fortune or chemistry the right people are willing to step forward and offer themselves. That’s what these people did, and I hope you will indulge me by offering them your collective applause. [Applause]

I am incredibly honored by the presence tonight of Abraham Foxman, a genuine legend of this, the greatest of causes, for so very, very long. I know he is here because the incorrigible Mickey Mauer said: “If you want me to chair this dinner, you have to come out personally.” But whatever got him here, it is a great privilege for all of us, and of course for me. I actually met him once before, long ago, but he came right up and greeted me by name before I could say hello to him, and I said, “Well Mr. Foxman, how marvelous of you to remember after so long.” And he said, “To be honest, I am not that good with faces, but I never forget a suit.” [Laughter]

That I should be selected by this organization for this particular recognition means more to me than I will be able to convey. I will try, in these brief moments, but I want you to know that on my way out the door, my longtime assistant Maggie reminded me that this is only the second-greatest compliment of its kind that I have been offered. I had forgotten this, but she reminded me that a bosom-buddy from college days, now Dr. Mark Eig, of suburban Washington D.C., still a very close friend, said this to her about me: “Daniels is the smartest guy I have ever met in my life who wasn’t Jewish.” Now that is a compliment! [Applause] I recognize that probably places me number 1,590-something on his list of smart guys, but I will take it, that is really terrific.

In all seriousness, nights like this, occasions like this, come along sometimes in this job, and often I think they are *ex officio*. It’s not about you, it’s about the position in public employment that you temporarily have, but this one is very, very special. And it brought to mind that wonderful phrase that his honor Richard Daley, Mayor Richard the First, once said on some like occasion, he said, “Tonight I honestly feel I have reached the ‘pinochle’ of success.” [Laughter]

I hope it's not inappropriate to intrude with a few more serious reflections on what has been a fun night, and I don't want to ruin it. Somebody sent me a clipping of a little-bitty paper in Southern Indiana about the funeral of a local citizen of some renown. The person writing the story said that at the gravesite unfortunately one of those carrying the casket stepped in a hole and broke his ankle. He said it cast a pall over the entire occasion. [Laughter] That I do not seek to do, but this is a rare evening. It is a rare chance to focus one's thoughts on a subject that frequently comes to my mind, but that I won't have a better opportunity to reflect on publicly, so permit me if you will.

The highest ambition, it seems to me, of any great cause is to pursue successfully its own obsolescence. That is, to work itself out of business, to succeed so thoroughly that there is no longer any need. I have been associated, for instance, with an organization that for many decades has sought to teach young people the history and the philosophy of free institutions and to fill in any gaps that might be there in their education, and really to promote the idea of human freedom as the best way to organize societies and protect human dignity and produce peace in the world. There was a little window of time not long ago when you thought such organizations might have succeeded and could disband. It is clear now that was premature. History did not end as some had forecast. I have just been thinking about that fact that I might have thought, at many points in my life, that the Anti-Defamation League would finally work its way out of being. That the evil, that the poison of anti-Semitism would finally be erased from this country and one would hope from the world.

Many of you know that the Daniels family, and my sister Deb who is here, and I arrived in Indiana from the American South in the late 1950s. No one knew the term then, but it was an immediate exercise in what we now call "diversity training." We landed in the middle of an all-Jewish neighborhood. It was one of the best things that could ever have happened to me. I made some lifelong friends there; all of my buddies, my whole paper route, everybody on the school bus—were Jewish guys and girls.

This is a true story: One blustery winter's day around New Year's my Dad told me—you could still do this back then—to take the Christmas tree out and burn it. I got to playing football in the snow with some of my friends and it blew away. I thought I was off the hook, but somebody brought it back. It could only belong to one house on our street. I was in big trouble. [Laughter]

When I went to college, quotas, the hidden dark secret of the Ivy League, had pretty much been finally gotten rid of. Every Jewish kid had just as much of a chance to go to schools like ours as they deserved.

I got there, our class got there, right on the heels of the Six Day War. Everybody was thrilled with what Israel had accomplished on its own behalf. It was like America had survived or successfully defended itself.

I would never have guessed those many years ago that as it approaches now, I guess in just three or four years, its centennial, that the Anti-Defamation League would still have such an enormous challenge. All that seemed to be on its way out of American life and good riddance and about time. But now what one writer has called "the oldest hatred" is back again, in new forms and

from very new and strange quarters. We didn't get a chance to hear the speech that Mr. Foxman prepared for tonight, but I'm going to go get it and you should too, because I bet it catalogues, as so many folks have recently, the astonishing virulence and widespread nature of anti-Semitism in this world. It is a matter of both surprise and also enormous alarm to me, and I hope to you.

How strange to me that sectors and people who I once thought of as allies of the Jewish people in the fight against anti-Semitism have changed uniforms and changed sides, completely. Think about the international community. One of my early memories of living on West 73rd street in Indianapolis was that on Halloween my buddies and I went out and collected candy. The Jewish kids went out and collected money for UNICEF. I thought they were nuts by the way.

[Laughter] But the UN today, the UN for which they gave up their Halloween, is a hotbed of animosity, lies, and hatred for the state of Israel and the people who created it.

The African American community, it must be said: "Who were the boys of Mississippi? Who died in Mississippi for civil rights? Who among the white people joined with African Americans in the struggles of the late 1960s?" It was young Jewish people as much as anybody and yet, whether it is Mr. Farrakhan or others, there are things said these days that ought not to be said in our land, and they come from people who should know better.

The "Academic Left," the intellectual leaders, some of the most active activists on behalf of the causes we in this age call "liberal" or "left wing," were quite often sincerely motivated teachers and students and thinkers from the Jewish community and yet some of the most vigorous attacks these days on the state of Israel, its right to exist, its legitimacy, and on the communities of Jewish people who support it, come from there.

Most dangerously, a very large sector of one of the great religions of this world is openly, unapologetically, committed to threatening and hoping for the extinction of the state of Israel. Not a fringe movement of that religion, but a mainstream portion. And it just simply must be called for what it is.

We have tried hard in our administration to welcome everybody into the Indiana family, and that includes the Muslim community of this state. I've held the first Iftar Dinners ever at the Governor's Residence and we've had regular meetings with some wonderfully admirable people. I was so proud, in the wake of the Fort Hood atrocity, that as far as I know, the first clear statement of denunciation came from the Indiana Muslim Alliance that said, "This is not the faith we believe in, this is unacceptable in every way." But that has not been the universal reaction. The congressman from the district in which we are meeting dismissed it as a matter of mental illness, ignoring the fact that there once was a fear we called Nazism, that openly encouraged hatred of the Jewish people, encouraged violence against the Jewish people, and undoubtedly induced people who are mentally challenged to do terrible things. Once again we have this occurring in this world.

If old allies have now become enemies, it is certainly more important than ever that new allies step forward. I want to say to those people who are not of the Jewish faith, that this is our fight too. This is as American a fight as I can imagine, and it is regrettable that too many people who see the world, see many of the world's issues, as I do, have sat out of the struggle against anti-

Semitism in the past. They may not be hostile to it, but have not participated in it. They left it to others, left it to Mr. Foxman, and brave people like him. And I would say to people with my faith, with my general philosophy of government, of my political party: that's not acceptable. This cause needs every friend it can get. It is facing threats as real and as determined as any it faced in the 1920s and '30s and in the centuries before. And if we've been held back because of disagreements over what I would term lesser matters, than those should be subordinated or set aside. We could just agree to disagree. But in the face of the real dangers of today, it is just so necessary that all friends of freedom and all friends of justice call it as it is. Do not let slurs, let alone incitements to hatred and violence, pass unremarked because of fear that you are not being correct enough.

We are so blessed in this town, if you don't know, those of you who, and I hope it's all of you, who have read the book Defiance and have seen the movie about the heroic Bielski brothers and their successful partisan activities, saving hundreds and hundreds of Jews in the toughest days of WWII. You know we have a man in this town, Meyer Bronicki, who was part of that, and if you get a chance, be sure to meet him while we still have him; you are talking history when you do.

In the book Defiance there's a term, "malbush," which, as I understood it from the book, described a person of intellectual gifts and great talent, but who was totally unsuited to the task of being a partisan, of fighting, of surviving in the woods. That hard, dangerous, and difficult work brought a whole new set of elites to the front: those who had been peasants before, in many cases. Let's not anyone here be a malbush in the effort to defend freedom, to contest anti-Semitism. We need people of intellectual gifts, but we need people with a level of courage who are willing to do the hard and the dirty work.

I have some great news for you, some proud news, and I have permission to share it. I stumbled onto it as I was thinking about tonight, reading and re-reading some things I'd saved about the new anti-Semitism. I called Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld down at Indiana University, who'd given two speeches that I had in my file, just to see if he had any thoughts about the topic. And he gave me the greatest news, and I'm so pleased that President McRobbie of Indiana University is here. By his leave and Dr. Rosenfeld's, I share it with you. Very, very soon on the campus of IU, will be born a new institute: The Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism. I am so proud that that is happening, and happening here in our state. Michael, thank you very, very much. [Applause] I just look forward to the work that is done there, the scholarship that occurs, and I hope the frontal response to a would-be new wave of terror, so that we don't have to ask "What if?" in our later days and our children never have to ask it of us.

It is surprising to me, and sad in its way, that America and the world still needs an Anti-Defamation League. But it is so uplifting and inspiring to me that you are all here. In this job of mine, people are always thanking me when they shouldn't, just for doing things I was hired to do. Being thanked tonight for any paltry thing I have ever done in this effort, I think goes too far, I do. I will leave here though, like Oscar Schindler, thinking about what more I might have done, and in my case at least, and yours, the more we all can do. I hope you will go out of here with that same motivation, so that that oldest hatred is confronted in our state and in our nation with new energy, and new courage. Thank you for this recognition, but mostly for your commitment to this most urgent of causes.