

[politics]

HED: Target Practice

SUB: A wholly unfair and sneaky takedown of Mark Davis, Dallas' most influential conservative commentator.

By Barrett Brown

Newly elected Dallas County Community College District trustee Bill Metzger was understandably excited at having been picked to be among those speaking at August's Republican Freedom Rally in North Dallas. "I had written some stuff, what I wanted to say," Metzger told the 200 or so souls assembled at Hillcrest High School's Franklin Stadium. "But I knew when I got here, it didn't mean anything, because I'm here for one reason: my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without whom I wouldn't be here today. And I've got to give him all the credit."

Having thus dispensed all available credit, Metzger was unable to thank or even mention his mother, who must have been of some assistance by virtue of having held the same seat immediately prior to his taking it. Surely her connections had helped. In any case, Metzger did find time to mention his own son and even ended his speech with a rhyme that the young fellow had supplied for the occasion: "Be a star. Vote straight R!"

Mark Davis was the natural choice to emcee the event. As a *Dallas Morning News* op-ed columnist and WBAP 820 host who also regularly subs for Rush Limbaugh on his nationally syndicated radio show, Davis is Dallas' highest-profile conservative commentator. But he has a more nuanced take than Metzger on the duties of a conservative to his party of preference. At the rally, Davis made a point of noting that a candidate doesn't merit support simply by virtue of his name being listed next to an R. Attendees, he said, should be voting for "the right kind of Republican." He said, "There are two kinds of politicians that need to fear the passion of a little group I like to spread some love to every once in a while: the Tea Party! There are two kinds of politicians that need to fear their wrath: Democrats making government too big and Republicans making government too big!"

Such willingness to criticize elements of his own party is a rare and wonderful attribute, one that gives us some indication as to Mark Davis' chops as a political commentator. But, given Davis' national stature, it seems only prudent that we give the fellow a closer look. So on to his CV and, then, a single devilish question posed to the man himself and designed to show what he's really made of.

On paper, the San Antonio-born Davis has done quite a bit to have reached his elevated station. After graduating from the University of Maryland, he worked stints as a news reporter in a couple of markets and even managed to get his first radio show at a station in Florida at the age of 24, later hosting similar programs in Memphis and D.C. before making his way back to Texas in 1994 to take what has become an extraordinarily successful spot on WBAP.

Even more admirable than Davis' résumé, though, is his aforementioned willingness to criticize figures of his own party when appropriate. In the course of hosting the Limbaugh program a few months back, he lauded Rand Paul for appearing on NPR at the risk of hostile questioning while also criticizing the candidate for having recently cancelled a scheduled appearance on *Meet the Press*. Davis said Paul "did not have the guts to show up." When a caller claimed that liberals don't have the guts to show up on *Fox News*, Davis corrected him, pointing out that the network routinely plays host to liberal guests, none of whom appear to have been kidnapped for the purpose.

Davis has even gone so far as to criticize Sarah Palin for saying that the mainstream media has asked her questions that she and her supporters consider unfair. "There are no unfair questions," Davis said. I am happy that he thinks so.

A few days after the rally, I asked Davis a question. The question was my play in a game I call Get the Conservative to Denounce Ronald Reagan in Extraordinarily Harsh Terms Without the Conservative Realizing That This Is What He Is Doing. It's a great game. Here's how you play:

1. Locate a conservative.
2. Ask him what he thinks about certain behavior that you know Ronald Reagan to have exhibited but which the conservative probably does not.
3. Inevitably receive an answer in which that behavior is denounced.
4. For every insult that is accidentally directed toward Reagan, add a point.
5. Add a point if the conservative is merely of the fiscal or foreign policy sort and thus potentially knowledgeable about history and harder to trick. Subtract a point if it's a social conservative.
6. Subtract a point if the conservative acknowledges that conservatives also engage in this behavior.
7. If the conservative does not accidentally insult Reagan, you lose.

Now, let's see how I did. Here was my

question for Mark Davis: “Speaking of moral equivalence, there seems to have been a significant rise in rhetoric against Israel on such occasions as it reacts against outside threats in which that nation’s actions are equated with those of Nazi Germany. Is such deliberate use of that kind of terminology the result of mere sloppy thinking or is it something worse?”

Background for the reader: in 1982, Israel launched an attack on West Beirut in an effort to strike at the PLO, at which point a distressed King Fahd of Saudi Arabia called Reagan and asked him to intervene against Israel. Agreeing that intervention was prudent, Reagan called Menachem Begin and informed the Israeli prime minister that he was perpetrating a “holocaust.” Begin, whose parents were both killed in the actual Holocaust, responded that he knew perfectly well what constituted a holocaust and that he did not believe this particular expedition to fit the criteria. Nonetheless, Begin backed off at Reagan’s request.

Answer by Mark Davis: “Nazi Germany and Hitler have sadly become the go-to references when rhetorical bullies seek to end debate with a cheap shot. Whether it’s an Obama critic suggesting his socialism has a Hitler flavor, or a Bush-basher attaching Hitler-style motivations to George W’s exercise of executive power, these playground taunts achieve nothing to advance discourse. It stems from two common characteristics of today: immaturity and laziness. The thin-skinned adolescent rants of much of today’s dialogue show that we often prefer to use flamethrowers to incinerate opponents rather than scalpels to dissect what they are saying.”

Results: Davis has accidentally characterized Reagan with a total of seven negative descriptions. He subtracts a point from my score by noting that even conservatives engage in such behavior and also gets the handicap point for being a social conservative, leaving me with a score of 5. I remain the grandmaster of some stupid game I made up.

Now, the reader may perhaps object that it is unfair to set someone up in such a fashion, akin to baiting deer in an effort to shoot them. If that is the case—and it is not—then let us do something more akin to sitting around in the woods and waiting for a deer to walk into a tree over and over again until it dies. Let us see if Davis can write a column in which he accidentally attacks Reagan without any prompting from me. Better yet, let us see if Davis can write a column in which he accidentally attacks Reagan not only while him-

selfbringing him up by name, but also in the course of lauding him for having refrained from doing several things that he actually quite famously did.

A few months ago, Davis took Obama to task for signing a nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Russians. “The ignorant assertion that our nukes and their nukes are the same is not new,” Davis noted in a column for the *Morning News*. “Ronald Reagan ignored such droning 30 years ago, driving the Soviets to their knees by refusing to gut U.S. nuclear capability and by refusing to scrap missile defense technology.”

Davis is correct to note that the sameness of U.S. and Russian nukes is an old idea, but to the extent that anyone outside of Austin has advocated such a view, it would be hard to top Reagan, who routinely painted all nukes with the same brush. Such weapons, Reagan proclaimed, are “totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilization.” The Great Communicator, then, not only failed to ignore such “droning” but routinely engaged in it himself, having greatly communicated in 1984 that “nuclear arsenals are far too high” and that his “dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the earth,” never once stopping to qualify his statements in such a way that Davis might have preferred. It wasn’t for nothing that Terry Dolan, chair of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, complained around then that “[t]he administration hasn’t co-opted the ‘peace’ movement. The ‘peace’ movement has co-opted the administration.”

Reagan did not confine himself to mere high-flown rhetoric. Davis to the contrary, Reagan did indeed “gut” the republic’s nuclear arsenal by way of SALT III, later known as START, a series of treaties that were updated by George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and area man George W. Bush, and which eventually resulted an 80 percent reduction of all nuclear weapons. Obama’s 2010 version of START is simply a long-scheduled continuance of a policy that Reagan considered to be among the most important of his own accomplishments—and which had been American policy since the first SALT treaty was signed by that dreamy idealist Richard Nixon. Davis did not get around to mentioning any of this in his column, perhaps due to space constraints. Though he is presumably more erudite than DCCCD trustee Bill Metzger, he does not seem to be much more proficient in the budgeting of his output.

The problem here is not that Davis is a

particularly bad pundit. He appears to be better informed and more intellectually honest than most of the people who believe the things that he believes. Which is to say that he is in the regular habit of taking his allies to task when they deserve it. That he sometimes does this on purpose makes him a particularly good pundit. And that, I would suggest, is the real problem.

I apologize to Davis for having asked him a question with the sole intent of making him look bad. I did so because I wanted the answer to a different and broader question: having been given the opportunity to inform the electorate of Dallas and even sometimes of the entire nation, are you sure that you are competent to fulfill that responsibility and that you are not simply doing damage to the understanding of the millions of people? I consider this to be a fair question. To get an accurate answer, one must ask it indirectly.