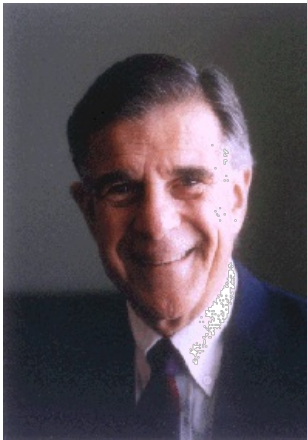


AlbertMohler.com

An Army of One — America Has an Atheist Congressman

Sunday, March 18, 2007



The Secular Coalition for America is horribly excited about the fact that it recently uncovered America's (apparently) one and only congressman who is an admitted atheist. The group's announcement hit the headlines last week, but the publicity stunt is not likely to make Americans more likely to elect atheist candidates in the future.

The Secular Coalition of America's stunt was to offer \$1,000 to the highest ranking atheist in terms of public office. They uncovered Rep. Pete Stark [D-CA], who has represented a liberal San Francisco-area district since 1973.

From coverage in The Los Angeles Times:

Secular groups Monday applauded a public acknowledgment by Rep. Pete Stark that he does not believe in a supreme being, making the Fremont Democrat the first member of Congress — and the highest-ranking elected official in the U.S. — to publicly acknowledge not believing in God. The American Humanist Assn. plans to take out an ad in the Washington Post today congratulating the congressman for his public stance and highlighting the contributions of other prominent secular humanists, such as writers Barbara Ehrenreich and Kurt Vonnegut and actress Julia Sweeney. Fred Edwards, a spokesman for the group, said non-theistic Americans often faced discrimination for their views.

“So often throughout American history, people who are non-theistic or don't believe in a supreme being can't get elected to public office or, if they inform the public of their view, they don't get reelected,” he said. “We're trying to increase the acceptance of non-theists as every bit as American as everybody else.”

Rep. Stark, it turns out, identified himself as a Unitarian. The Unitarian Universalist Association of America just might be the most diverse group in America. Members can believe anything and nothing. Rep. Stark provided more information about his beliefs (or lack of beliefs) in an e-mail to the Los Angeles paper:

“When the Secular Coalition asked me to complete a survey on my religious beliefs, I indicated I am a Unitarian who does not believe in a supreme being,” Stark said. “Like our nation's founders, I strongly support the separation of church and state. I look forward to working with the Secular Coalition to stop the promotion of narrow religious beliefs in science, marriage contracts, the military and the provision of social services.”

That's a pretty big agenda for one lone congressman, but Rep. Stark seems to have big plans.

In an editorial published March 15, the paper congratulated Rep. Stark on his candor, and suggested that he is likely not the only non-theist in Congress — just the only honest one:

Courage comes in many forms, and maybe responding to a questionnaire is one of them. In this case, however, Stark is hardly taking a risk; he has represented a left-leaning Bay Area district since 1973. Still, those who fail to profess at least a vague belief in some kind of supreme being are not likely to succeed in politics. In a Gallup poll last month, 53% of respondents said they would not vote for an otherwise well-qualified atheist — far more than wouldn't vote for a homosexual (43%), a 72-year-old (42%), someone married for the third time (30%), a Mormon (24%) or a woman

(11%). That's perhaps unsurprising given that 47% of Americans in a 2002 Pew survey said religious belief is a prerequisite to be a good person. And then there's the biblical injunction against cavorting with the enemy (2 Corinthians 6:14): "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?" Unbelievers are clearly among the most distrusted members of American society. But it's not clear how many there are. A University of Minnesota study estimated atheists at 3% of the U.S. population; a Pew survey found 11% declaring "no religion, not a believer, atheist [or] agnostic," and a Harris Interactive poll put nonbelievers at 9% with an additional 12% expressing uncertainty. Whatever their number, it is statistically unlikely that Stark is the only nontheist among the 535 members of Congress. But he may be the most honest.

The paper may well be right. Congress doubtless includes many who express what the editorial called "at least a vague belief in some kind of supreme being." The public — many evangelicals included — asks for few clarifications when many of these vague beliefs are stated.

Several years ago, a prominent British sociologist complained that Christianity in America is often very thin on the ground. As evidence, he suggested that when American pollsters hear a man use the name of God to curse his dog, they count him a Christian.

Rep. Stark may or may not be the first of others to announce their atheism, but the paper was correct in explaining that this particular congressman had little to fear from his disclosure.

Indeed, *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported Sunday that Rep. Stark's announcement had been warmly received in his liberal district. Even the congressman was quick to point to the unusual character of his situation:

Still, Stark was struck by the fact that not one of his 534 colleagues in the House or Senate was willing to say he or she was an atheist.

"They were looking for the highest-ranking politician who would state his or her (lack of) belief in a supreme being," Stark said. "Well, I was the first and the second was a former member of the Berkeley school board. That's a pretty big gap."

That's not surprising, said Mark Thomas, assistant state director of American Atheists and the man who nominated Stark for recognition as the nation's highest-ranking "nontheist" politician — and won a \$1,000 prize for it.

"With the current political climate, many think it would be difficult to come out and say they don't believe in God," he said after speaking with the congressman outside Newark City Hall. "But Pete Stark hasn't paid a political price."

Article VI of the U. S. Constitution prohibits a religious test for public office — and we should be pleased that it does. This should be a matter left for the voters to decide. Rep. Stark may well be representative of his district in this respect. Time will tell.

The more important question is the one raised by Fred Edwards. He claims that resistance to atheistic candidates is a form of wrongful discrimination. Is it? Not hardly. Most voters instinctively understand that the most basic truths they cherish — including morality, freedom, and human rights — are ultimately secured by God, or they are not secured at all.

Rep. Stark may or may not be a courageous man. But his declaration of atheism is less remarkable for the fact that he made it, than for the fact that he was the *only* member of Congress to make it.

Nevertheless, as revealed in his e-mail to *The Los Angeles Times*, he has big plans. Count Rep. Pete Stark as an army of one.

