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Douglas Johnson v. MSW on Driehaus v. SBA List

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Douglas Johnson, Legislative Director of the National Right to Life Committee, has replied to my post yesterday about a press call sponsored by Catholics United regarding anti-abortion ads in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In that post, I wrote that Mr. Johnson interrupted the call, presenting his side of the argument. By using the word "interrupt" I did not mean to suggest that Mr. Johnson was in any way rude in his questioning. I did mean to suggest, and repeat now, that Mr. Johnson had no business being on a press call and that his presence there constituted an interruption. Mr. Johnson's full reply is printed in the Comments section after my article.

In his reply, Mr. Johnson writes, "The notion that it is all right for Mr. Winters to raise challenging questions in such a call and then go write about them, because he is the "press," but "very wrong" for me to do so, is pretentious and untenable." Is it? He notes that his newsletter has more subscribers than NCR, but that misses the point. Mr. Johnson is not a journalist in any way, shape or form. He does not answer to an editor. If you look at the end of his reply, he signs it and gives his title as "legislative director," not "reporter" or "columnist." His "newsletter" is not a "newspaper." Catholics United had sponsored this press call and the appropriate response from the National Right to Life Committee would be to have their own press call.

Mr. Johnson argues that there is little difference between my "advocacy" and his, another claim that does not bear scrutiny. I am guessing that he is a registered lobbyist and I am not. Yes, I argue about and comment upon positions and claims put forth by newsmakers, but that is not the same thing as advocacy. Advocates like Mr. Johnson make news. I merely comment upon it. Once I signed on with NCR as a full-time employee, I ceased making political donations. I can not attend, as I suppose Mr. Johnson does, a strategy session to organize voters or plan a political campaign. In fact, recently, I had to decline just such an invitation from a long-time friend whose politics are similar to my own, and with whom I formerly did consult, because such involvement is not appropriate for a journalist. I report on such activities and

comment on such activities but I do not partake in such activities. I am guessing that such involvement is the greater part of Mr. Johnson's work.

Mr. Johnson was kind enough to point out that on one of the central issues in the discussion yesterday, whether or not the Ohio law is constitutional, we agree. I believe that it should be left to the voters to sort out all but the most egregious claims, lies, half-truths and distortions that characterize a modern political campaign, not an appointed Elections Board. The idea offends my sense of how democracy should work and how the First Amendment should be applied. But, I am also offended by Mr. Johnson's failure to understand that the press has a distinct role to play in a democracy, as do issue advocates like himself. Confusing the two roles does not advance democracy, it only advances confusion. I stand by my article.

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