

Give Palin a Break

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 7, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

This columnist has been known to criticize former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin on many occasions. But, she is getting a bum rap now about her comments regarding Paul Revere. Yes, she conflated the facts of Revere's warning with its effects: Revere did not warn the British not to try and take the colonists' guns, he warned the colonists that the British were coming to take their guns, and they warned the British that this would provoke a fight.

So, Palin views Revere through the lens of the not-yet-adopted Second Amendment. I hope she digs a little deeper into history. For the colonists, the right to bear arms was linked to their fear of a standing army. In the centuries-long contrast between the liberties of the British people and the "slavery" of the Catholic French, one of the distinguishing characteristics was the lack of such a standing army in Britain. The Second Amendment was drafted in this context, not in the context of the desperate need for gun control laws in early 21st century America. But, the originalists on the Supreme Court think the Second Amendment should endorse such an individual right. I will concur with Justice Scalia in his originalist interpretation, provided the individual right to bear arms is limited to muskets.

But, back to Palin. The main reason I am willing to give her the benefit of the doubt as to the significance of Paul Revere is that he was not very significant in the first place. Most Americans have forgotten the name of the other patriot who rode out to Lexington and Concord to warn the colonists that the regulars of the British Army were approaching. His name was William Dawes. But, Dawes' name does not rhyme as readily as does Revere's and so, when Longfellow set out to write a poem about the evening before the Revolutionary War began, it was Revere's midnight ride that became famous. But, if Revere's boat had sunk in the Charles River that night, Dawes, who took the land route out of Boston, still would have gotten to Lexington and Concord in time to warn the patriots.

So, give Palin a break on this one. There are bigger fish to fry than the limited historical significance of Paul Revere.

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