

The Kind of Enemy You Want to Have

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By Andrew Christie

We all owe a debt to Lloyd Billingsley for his attempt to smear the reputation of a dead man on the occasion of his being awarded with a posthumous honor.

On June 28, Billingsley's essay, "Legacy of Zealotry," appeared in the on line edition of *City Journal*, "a quarterly magazine of urban affairs," and on the website of The Manhattan Institute, the neocon think tank founded by former Reagan CIA Director William Casey. The target of Billingsley's attack is Peter Douglas, the late executive director of the California Coastal Commission. His essay provides a valuable public reminder of the fundamental nature of the corporate state and the psychology of the reactionary right, which he ably represents.

Billingsley is displeased that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has "posthumously honored Douglas with the Walter B. Jones Coastal Steward of the Year Award," and that the agency's acting director declared "Peter was a legend in California's coastal history and his legacy today is a model for others [to] follow."

Billingsley serves as a pillar of the Public Research Institute, a tobacco and oil industry-funded, Koch Bros.-connected group that is opposed to universal health care and intent on the privatization of California's water supply. He's also a movie fan – focused mostly on the infiltration of Hollywood by Commies – so he should appreciate the suggestion that his attempt to desecrate the memory of a public servant is best read in the voice of Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore) haranguing George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Lines from his essay such as "shortly before he resigned to undergo cancer treatment, he pleaded for more authority for the commission," and "his passing raised no concern that the commission he helped found...had outlived its usefulness" demand to be read aloud in Mr. Potter's jaunty growl for full effect.

It is an obvious boon to Billingsley's rhetorical requirements that he did not actually know Peter Douglas. I actually did. As it happens, Peter was not the power-mad, autocratic Stalinist of Billingsley's fever dreams; rather, he was someone who believed down to his bones in fighting for the right of the public to access public lands, and fighting against the environmental depredations wrought by the kinds of entities that pay Mr. Billingsley's lunch tab. Expanding on the *It's a Wonderful Life* analogy, Mr. Potter really does embody the values Billingsley holds dear, and Peter Douglas and his life's work really does recall the spirit and character of George Bailey, if one substitutes the California coast and the Coastal Commission for Bedford Falls and the local savings & loan.

In the course of channeling Mr. Potter, Billingsley disgorges a fizzy batch of falsehoods and distortions like unto tiny bubbles which pop at the touch.

Billingsley is incensed that Douglas coauthored Proposition 20, creating the Coastal Commission, wrote the California Coastal Act, and went on to become executive director of the Commission. Billingsley leaves out the part where a majority of the voters of the state of California voted the Coastal Commission into existence and their elected representatives created the Coastal Act. This omission maintains the sleek ideological lines of his premise that Douglas' achievements are examples of unchecked personal power and undue influence. He lists a few other examples of same – a “wealthy education lobbyist” and a “real-estate tycoon” who also drafted California ballot initiatives or were appointed to state boards. (For the record, Peter lived in a cluttered one-bedroom apartment, on a state salary that bore no resemblance to the compensation accorded lobbyists and tycoons.) Billingsley refrains from making comparisons to the likes of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, who were deeply involved with drafting the Declaration of Independence and waging the revolution that that secured same, then turned around and became chief executives of the country they'd created. Billingsley surely approves of ideological consistency, so we may safely assume that he is deeply troubled by power-mad founding fathers who immodestly failed to step aside and let someone else run things.

Billingsley writes: “Douglas labored mightily to win the power to impose fines directly. Incredibly, the state's Legislative Analyst Office endorsed this demand.... Douglas argued that levying fines directly could be a ‘tool’ for enforcement that would improve efficiency and reduce violations.” Yes, they would, which we know because this authority is shared by virtually every other state regulatory agency and local government. Incredibly.

Billingsley wants us to know that 25 years ago, “Commissioner Mark Nathanson...extorted ‘payments from Hollywood celebrities and others seeking coastal building permits,’ according to the Los Angeles Times. He wound up serving prison time in the early 1990s.” Thank heavens there has never been such a thing as a corrupt legislator. We would have to shutter the state houses, disband Congress, and give up this representational government thing, as it would obviously have outlived its usefulness.

Billingsley writes: “Douglas and his commission made coastal residency a practical impossibility for working Californians.” Some might think the real estate market can more reasonably lay claim to that distinction, but follow the implied logic: by maintaining much of the coast in a relatively unspoiled, undeveloped condition, the Coastal Commission is responsible for increasing the value of the land. Were the coast festooned with the wall-to-wall power plants and high-end resorts that would have been its fate absent Peter Douglas and the Coastal Commission, there would be no more coast left to build on and the potential coastal residency of working Californians would be moot. Instead, the Coastal Commission has preserved natural coastal land in an attractive state and thereby enhanced its value. Damn their autocratic Stalinist zeal!

Billingsley writes: “Douglas's CCC forced development inland—where energy demands soar along with the temperatures in homes and cars.” Do tell? Fourteen years before it gave Peter Douglas a posthumous award, here's what NOAA, in its study “Pressures on Coastal Environments: Population – Distribution, Density and Growth” had to say on that subject:

“[Nationwide,] between 1994 and 2015, the largest coastal population increases are...projected for Los Angeles (1.6 million) and San Diego (1.3million).... Growth

along the southern California coast—from Santa Barbara to San Diego—has also been rapid, averaging about 4,000 newcomers every week.”

In short, Billingsley is flat wrong, and he’s loud about it. The Coastal Commission’s standard practice is to require that coastal development projects meet permit conditions. It has required that new development avoid environmentally sensitive habitat or mitigate for impacts on such areas if those impacts can’t be avoided. It has required that public access to the beach be maintained. Do developers like to go where environmental protection is scarce, public land is a dim memory, and the regulatin’ is easy? You betcha. Hence: Florida and Texas. But they still really like building on the California coast, too, which is why they continue submitting applications for coastal development permits and meeting their conditions. Rather than being “forced inland,” they get those permits about 90 percent of the time.

(This is an extremely inconvenient truth for Coastal Commission-bashers. When confronted with it, Billingsley’s fellow travelers at the Pacific Legal Foundation – which promptly re-posted his essay on their blog -- like to argue that because the permit applicant could make more money from unfettered, unconditioned development, such permit conditions constitute a trampling of rights and a taking of private property. It doesn’t matter how many times how many judges tell them “no, they don’t,” the PLF’s lawyers will always be able to find an irate permit-seeker willing to pay for many billable hours for the pleasure of taking another ride on that pony.)

One might wish there were an etiquette manual available – *Do's and Don'ts for Maligning the Recently Deceased if You Are the Kind of Person Who Does That Sort of Thing* -- that could give Mr. Billingsley some advice, such as being extra careful to at least get one’s facts straight, considering the nature of the activity in which one is engaged.

As a hot-eyed zealot, Lloyd Billingsley may have some things to say in response to the above. If and when he says them, he might keep in mind the distinct advantage he possesses: he is alive and therefore in a position to defend himself.

Peter Douglas does not require that advantage, as the California coast is his best defense.

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