

Mitchell's Musings: 3-7-11 What "Everyone" Knows

Some old timers, especially if they came from the New York City area, will know the name Jean Shepherd. Shepherd was on the radio in New York's WOR from the early 1950s until the mid-1970s, typically late in the evening or at night. And he just talked. He told stories about his family, growing up in the 1930s, being in the Army in World War II, and about odd items in the news. If you have ever seen the movie "A Christmas Story," something of a classic of the season, you have seen a film based on these radio stories.¹

Some of the radio stories Shepherd told were true, others were embellished or fictional. WOR was a "clear channel" AM radio station which means that no other stations were on the same frequency in the U.S. At night, AM signals carry over a wide area, even a thousand miles, so his program could be heard up and down the East Coast and into the Midwest and Canada.

Early in his career, Shepherd was on the air after midnight. In consultation with his night listeners, who could phone in, he concocted a hoax. Most hoaxes are developed in secret. The interesting thing about this hoax is that it was not done in secret; anyone with a radio could listen in as the hoax was first concocted and then implemented over an extended period. Essentially, what Shepherd wanted to demonstrate was that simply by insisting that something was true, you could eventually get the talking heads and chattering classes of the world to believe it.

Shepherd's hoax involved having his listeners walk into bookstores and ask for a non-existent book by a non-existent author. Shepherd and his listeners came up with the titillating book title "I, Libertine." He was interviewed about the I, Libertine hoax on a radio program in the 1960s about a decade after the event. You can hear the interview in two parts here:

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tCfVhsTj-E>

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yly5grbn3I>

One of the listeners who was aware of the hoax was a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who eventually arranged with Shepherd to tell the story.

I tell you this tale because of two stories that appeared recently in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Everyone knows that the public is furious with public employees and supports taking away their collective bargaining rights. Right? How does everyone know? Because it has been reported that way, over and over again.

¹A sample scene is at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdA_2tKoiU.

But a *Wall Street Journal* poll in fact says everyone who knows that to be a fact is wrong.

March 2, 2011

WSJ/NBC Poll: Strong Support for Bargaining Rights

Americans strongly oppose efforts to strip unionized government workers of their rights to collectively bargain, even as they want public employees to contribute more money to their retirement and health-care benefits, the latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll shows.

Eliminating collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers over health care, pensions or other benefits would be either “mostly unacceptable” or “totally unacceptable,” 62% of those surveyed said. Only 33% support such limits...

The full article is at <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/03/02/wsjnbc-poll-strong-support-for-bargaining-rights/tab/print/>

Everyone also knows that the public is itching to cut the federal budget deficit and that for the first time “entitlements” are on the cutting block. Right? One problem, though. A *Wall Street Journal* poll says the opposite:

March 3, 2011

Poll Shows Budget-Cuts Dilemma: Many Deem Big Cuts to Entitlements 'Unacceptable,' but Retirement and Means Testing Draw Support

By Neil King Jr. and Scott Greenberg

WASHINGTON— Less than a quarter of Americans support making significant cuts to Social Security or Medicare to tackle the country's mounting deficit, according to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, illustrating the challenge facing lawmakers who want voter buy-in to alter entitlement programs. In the poll, Americans across all age groups and ideologies said by large margins that it was "unacceptable" to make significant cuts in entitlement programs in order to reduce the federal deficit. Even tea party supporters, by a nearly 2-to-1 margin, declared significant cuts to Social Security "unacceptable." ...

Full story at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704728004576176741120691736.html>

The moral? If all you know is what you read in the papers (or nowadays on the Internet), be careful about what stories you read.