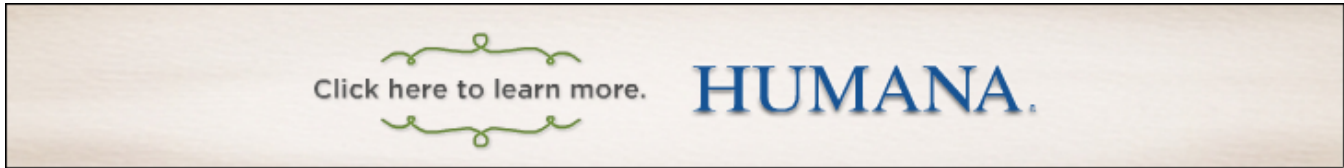


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Ed Brayton is a journalist, commentator and speaker. He is the co-founder and president of [Michigan Citizens for Science](#) and co-founder of [The Panda's Thumb](#). He has written for such publications as The Bard, Skeptic and Reports of the National Center for Science Education, spoken in front of many organizations and conferences, and appeared on nationally syndicated radio shows and on C-SPAN. Ed is also a Fellow with

the Center for Independent Media and the host of [Declaring Independence](#), a one hour weekly political talk show on WPRR in Grand Rapids, Michigan.(static)

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## **Other Information**

Ed Brayton also blogs at [Positive Liberty](#) and [The Panda's Thumb](#)

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## [When the Left Acts Like the Right](#)

Posted on: December 2, 2010 10:37 AM, by [Ed Brayton](#)

Glenn Greenwald, one of the most intellectually honest and consistent commentators on the left, [absolutely rips](#) The Nation for the [hackjob story](#) they did on the TSA issue recently.

The article is headlined "TSAstroturf: The Washington Lobbyists and Koch-Funded Libertarians Behind the TSA Scandal," and is devoted to the claim that those objecting to the new TSA procedures -- such as Tyner -- are not what they claim to be. Rather, they are Koch-controlled plants deliberately provoking and manufacturing a scandal -- because, after all, what real American in their right mind would do anything other than meekly submit with gratitude and appreciation to these procedures?

The Nation piece really was atrocious. It admits that there are legitimate civil liberties concerns about the intrusive nature of the TSA's new procedures, yet it still tries to paint those who are protesting those procedures as all being on the Koch brothers payroll. It's quite bizarre.

Never mind that the ACLU and other liberal organizations who are as far from the right wing noise machine as you can get are also fighting against those procedures and filing legal actions against them. And what they did to the poor guy who infamously told a TSA officer that he would sue them if they touched his "junk" is appalling.

So the article begins with a claim about what the authors "sense" to be true -- "something strange" going on -- followed by innuendo, achieved through the slothful use of scare quotes, that Tyner is something other than an "ordinary guy." One will search the article in total futility for a shred of evidence that supports this accusatory, smearing opening paragraph. It continues:

*While this issue is certainly important -- and offensive -- to Americans, we are nonetheless skeptical about how and why this story turned into a national movement. In fact, this whole campaign feels a bit like déjà-vu: As the first reporters to expose the Tea Party as an Astroturf PR campaign funded by FreedomWorks and Koch-related front groups back in February, 2009, we see many of the same elements driving the current "rebellion" against the TSA: Koch-related libertarians, Washington lobbyists and PR operatives posing as "ordinary citizens," and suspicious fake-grassroots outrage relentlessly promoted in the same old right-wing echo chamber.*

They follow up their evidence-free innuendo in the opening paragraph with even stronger accusatory claims in the second: Tyner, they strongly imply without directly accusing him, is a "Koch-related libertarian" (whatever that means) and a "Washington lobbyist and PR operative posing as [an] 'ordinary citizen'," and his outrage over what was done to him is "fake." The implicit accusations and innuendo are piling up while the evidence remains non-existent. It continues (emphasis in original):

*So far, all we know about "ordinary guy" John Tyner III, the freedom fighter who took on the TSA agents, is that, according to a friendly hometown profile in the San Diego Union-Tribune, "he leans strongly libertarian and doesn't believe in voting. TSA security policy, he asserts 'isn't Republican and it isn't Democratic'." [emphasis added]*

*Tyner attended private Christian schools in Southern California and lives in Oceanside, a Republican stronghold next to Camp Pendleton, the largest Marine Corps base on the West Coast.*

These two paragraphs -- the heart of the case against Tyner -- are insidious. By their own admission, this is "all [they] know" about Tyner: he has failed to swear his loyalty to one of the two major political parties, a grievous sin worthy of deep suspicion.

The magazine has since apologized to Tyner but they've continued to defend their claim that the opposition to the TSA patdown procedures is nothing more than a Koch-funded astroturf campaign. Jeremy Scahill, a guy I really respect, tweeted about it:

"The article my magazine, The Nation, published about John Tyner is a shameful smear."

Cory Doctorow from Boing Boing said much the same thing. And they are absolutely right.

The problem is that the left is acting exactly like the right here. The left is doing with the Koch brothers exactly what Glenn Beck and the right have been doing with George Soros forever. If Beck can find any hint of a connection between any person or organization with Soros, that immediately discredits anything that person or organization does or says. And if the Nation can find any hint of a connection between any person or organization and the Koch brothers, that immediately discredits anything that person or organization does or says.

Even if the only "connection" they can find is that the person deems themselves to be libertarian minded, that's enough to build this ridiculous story to discredit him -- and even when they themselves admit that he's *right* in the things he's saying. This is pure tribal politics -- I've deemed person X the enemy so anything vaguely associated with him is intrinsically evil.

The Koch brothers helped found the Cato Institute and the Cato Institute pushes some policies that the left doesn't like (and that I don't like either). But they've also fought long and hard against violations of the fourth amendment, in favor of separation of church and state, against the expansion of executive power, against warrantless wiretaps and torture and extraordinary rendition, against foreign wars of aggression, against the support of tyrants abroad and much more.

The Koch brothers do support a lot of groups and organizations whose policy preferences I dislike. And those policies should be criticized. But they have also supported, through their donations to libertarian foundations, Radley Balko's brilliant work on the inequities of the criminal justice system, false convictions, prosecutorial and police misconduct, and asset forfeiture.

All of this is a variation on what I have long called the argumentum ad labelum. Partisan hacks persuade others largely by giving them cognitive shortcuts to replace having to think. The right has long done this by demonizing liberalism, so much so that their simpleminded followers now think that if you can apply the word "liberal" to someone, you've automatically defeated their arguments.

The right is far better at this sort of thing than the left but the same cognitive shortcuts are still produced and still effective for many. And that is exactly the kind of simplistic drivel the Nation produced in this article. The real

difference between the right and the left is that the left still has intellectuals who are consistent enough and intellectually honest enough to call out this behavior when it goes on:

Nor was this reaction mine alone. It seems to be a consensus even among liberal, Nation-friendly journalists that the attack on Tyner was not merely misguided, but odious, as all such journalists who commented (at least that I know of) condemned it, often in terms at least as harsh as the ones I used. In addition to their own Nation colleague Jeremy Scahill (who denounced it as a "shameful smear"), Mother Jones' News Editor Daniel Schulman wrote: "This Nation story is journalistic malpractice of the worst kind"; The American Prospect's Scott Lemieux, on his blog, called it "Liberal McCarthyism" and an "embarrassment"; and the usually rhetorically restrained Ezra Klein condemned it as a "hit piece" which I had "rightfully hammered." I point that out not as a means of proving I'm right -- it's obviously possible we're all wrong -- but simply to underscore that my distaste for what they did was not some unique, over-the-top, idiosyncratic reaction. At some point, if enough people favorably inclined to your political views -- including colleagues at your own magazine -- perceive what you did in the same way, that's compelling evidence that that's a fair reading of your article, whether you intended it or not.

Precisely so. The right has become a virtual echo chamber where hardly anyone ever criticizes this kind of sloppy thinking. The left should follow the example of Greenwald and these others in hammering it when they see it, precisely to avoid having such an echo chamber develop. As Cory Doctorow put it:

Hey, *Nation*: I remember when being anti-authoritarian, pro-dignity and pro-freedom were values of the progressive left. Some of us still embrace them.


So do I.

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4



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## Comments

1

The authors of the article did a follow up in which they tried to justify themselves. I'm going to take the liberty of reposting a comment I made at The League of Ordinary Gentlemen about their followup, which was just as execrable as their original article.

I'd like to point out one particular bit of Ames' and Levine's audacious dishonesty. In their [response to Greenwald](#), they write:

Here is what the article really said: like many Americans, we found the TSA's intrusive procedures offensive and we are against the invasive pat-downs and attack on our civil liberties. This was a given in our article, and we stated as much.

Just how much of a given was this in their [original article](#), and exactly how clearly did they state it? Try these quotes on for size.



While this issue is certainly important—and offensive—to Americans

OK, they state that the issue is offensive to Americans. They don't state that they personally found the pat-downs intrusive, invasive, offensive, and an attack on civil liberties. Nowhere in the article do they make any stronger criticism of the pat-downs than they do in this statement. So what else do they say?

let's take one more look at the TSA hysteria, and re-evaluate if we should continue to simply accept the surface narrative, or consider what we might learn by looking beneath the surface. Because everywhere you look, the alleged victims' stories often turn out to be false or highly suspicious,

there is clearly enough evidence to call into question the official version of events as a "spontaneous" outbreak of anti-TSA hysteria

What we should not do is assume that, in the midst of the worst recession in decades, when untold thousands of families are being thrown out of their homes in fraudulent foreclosures, that the biggest most pressing issue facing Americans is the "porn scan" at airports.

But don't ask us, ask Americans themselves: a recent CBS poll found that fewer than one in five Americans object to the TSA's use of scans and pat-downs. Nevertheless, like the Tea Party libertarian protests that "erupted" "spontaneously" in February 2009, the protests against the TSA, and the media coverage of the spectacle, grips the nation.

So, contra their explicit claim, nowhere do they state that they think the pat-downs are an attack on civil liberties. Instead, they repeatedly pooh-poo those who object as manufacturing fake "anti-TSA hysteria," downplay it as not being a "pressing issue" and emphasize that a majority of Americans support it.

In other words, Ames and Levine blatantly lie in their follow-up article. They don't just spin the truth a bit, or put a favorable interpretation on their previous words. They lie. If vanden Heuvel actually has any interest in demonstrating *The Nation's* integrity, she needs to take serious action.

Posted by: James Hanley | [December 2, 2010 10:56 AM](#)

2

Missing /blockquote after the Scahill tweet?

Anyway, my reaction on seeing this was it looked like a rare case of a high-[RWA](#) orientation from someone on the political left rather than the political right. Despite the howling of the right, such fascistic inclinations are far less common on the left than they are on the right; but despite the relative rarity, they aren't nonexistent.

Posted by: abb3w | [December 2, 2010 11:01 AM](#)

3

I dunno, I personally find the idea that in order to fly without people "touching our junk" we have to support "racial profiling" (Which appears to be the overriding theme of the whole TSA ordeal) to be a pretty obvious red-herring from the right. There are people who are not interested in preserving individual liberties who will pull at

your heartstrings about liberty in order to promote racism etc in society and, in my view, that is exactly and only what is happening with regards to this TSA story ... I do hope I'm wrong but my experience is anytime you find yourself agreeing with right-wingers on anything you are on the wrong side of the issue.

Posted by: [=^skeptic cat^=](#) | [December 2, 2010 11:03 AM](#)

4

skeptic cat:

I think you're missing the point. Of course it's fair to point out that some right wingers who are criticizing the TSA are being hypocritical or have an ulterior motive. I've written several posts that said things like that over the last week. But it does not follow that merely because you agree that the TSA procedures are pointlessly invasive, you're therefore wrong or being hypocritical yourself. Even less does it follow that if you take that position you must be a Koch-financed agitator.

Posted by: Ed Brayton | [December 2, 2010 11:10 AM](#)

5

Even less does it follow that if you take that position you must be a Koch-financed agitator.

No shit. I've been agitating this position vigorously, and those damned Kochs haven't sent me a stinking penny yet. Bastards.

Posted by: James Hanley | [December 2, 2010 11:14 AM](#)

6

Just an aside --

And what they did to the poor guy who infamously told a TSA officer that he would sue them if they touched his "junk" is appalling.

The guy actually threatened the TSA officer with arrest rather than a lawsuit, which I found quite funny -- the TSA officer is an agent of the government; basically, a kind of cop. Another cop is going to arrest him for carrying out the law? I don't think so. A lawsuit, on the other hand, might actually have a chance (albeit, not a good one).

Posted by: Nemo | [December 2, 2010 11:35 AM](#)

7

Most of the TSA security measures are useless theater, and the long security lines themselves might present a major temptation to those wishing to harm many people at once. After all, nobody is checking for harmful stuff BEFORE you get in line.

Rather than screening everybody in an intrusive way, do it in an entirely random fashion (unless there is a tip or other good reason to screen), like the Mexican customs green line. I don't know if it still is like this, but was 15 years ago. If you have nothing to declare, you punch the big green button, and you have a random chance of thorough inspection. It serves to keep people honest pretty effectively I think.

Posted by: VJBinCT | [December 2, 2010 11:51 AM](#)

8

while i'm very much against these new regulations, [i've nothing but contempt](#) for those who cheerleaded torture, indefinite detention, and other assaults on human dignity only to be incensed that their own dignity is now treated as less than sacrosanct.

Posted by: [andrew](#) | [December 2, 2010 11:51 AM](#)

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