
Interview: Michael Billington

A Former Political Prisoner's Continuing Fight for Justice and Truth

Michael Billington, an associate of Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. since 1972, was released on parole on Oct. 19, 2000, after serving more than ten years in Federal and Virginia State prisons, as part of the political assault against LaRouche and associates. Billington was sentenced to 77 years by the Commonwealth of Virginia, on trumped-up charges of "securities violations." He was interviewed by New Federalist editor Nancy Spannaus for "The LaRouche Connection" cable television program, on Dec. 12.

Spannaus: Today, we're pleased to have with us on The LaRouche Connection, a man who is fast becoming, along with Lyndon LaRouche, the most famous political prisoner from the United States. This is Michael Billington. Pleased to have you on The LaRouche Connection today. And we're going to be talking in particular about material that's in your recent book, called *Reflections of an American Political Prisoner*.

Now, right off the bat, I would imagine, that many Americans would say to you, and to anyone who has this book, "What do you mean, American political prisoners?" And what do you say to people who deny the fact that there are political prisoners in America?

Billington: It's my sense that most people who followed the prosecution of LaRouche, and his associates, recognized that this was political in nature, from the beginning. Part of the problem is that people don't like being caught saying something that their neighbors might not approve of. And so, therefore, they might in their discussion say, "Oh, LaRouche, well, of course he did such and such." But most people recognize, I think, beyond any doubt—and when you talk with them long enough, you find out—that they recognize that this had to be political. They may have doubted that it was *entirely* political—that perhaps some crime had been committed, and so forth.

But many of those people who then read the transcripts, or saw the story of my case, and the way in which I was not only prosecuted with LaRouche in the Federal courts, but then put up in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and convicted, and condemned to 77 years in the penitentiary for—well, for nothing, for what was . . . a crime that if it were committed, would have meant a few months, under normal guidelines—recognize that this was a horrendous

breach of justice. And it helped to convince many, I think, that it was political in nature.

In general, though, I think that those who are watching the political corruption this year, in the election in the United States, have to face the fact, that for many, many years, people tolerated the political persecution of LaRouche, and his associates, like myself, without raising a hue and cry. Accepting the idea that political opponents in America can be dealt with, criminally, in this way, by the criminal Justice Department—a corrupted, criminal Justice Department—is a reflection of why they were subjected, this year, to one of the most corrupt elections in the history of America, and they were unable to do anything about it, or at least up until now. I think it's time that people think about what has to be done, about the horrendous level of corruption that left us in the crisis that we're in today.

Spannaus: Over the time that you were in prison, over ten years, the attitude of many Americans has shifted. They no longer have the trust in the Justice Department and FBI that they once did, prior to Waco, and Ruby Ridge, and all that. But, still, I think that you are correct, that there's an idea of "I don't want to see it, what can I do about it?"

But, for those who do understand, I think one of the major questions I've come up against, is this idea of "77 years, in prison for over ten years. How could anyone have sustained themselves with optimism, and continued to do work as you did?" And I wonder if you could address that.

Billington: Well, there are two sides to that. It's a very, very serious question, because the prison systems in America have degenerated so badly, that those who run the prisons, such as in the Commonwealth of Virginia, are very proud of the fact that they no longer are concerned in any way with rehabilitation, or redemption; that their concern is punishment, it's revenge, it's something that is very anti-Christian, in a nation which takes itself to be "Under God." And therefore, most of those who are subjected to long terms—without parole now, in this state and many other states—are subjected to a long period of bestialization, very little to do, very little access to education, or anything to uplift their spirits or their minds. And it's a very, very serious problem.

In my case, I had many advantages that most people don't. I had the advantage of being part of this global organization,



Michael Billington with his wife Gail, during a temporary release from prison in 1991. He was finally released on parole in October 2000, after serving more than ten years as a political prisoner.

a Renaissance organization, of which I had been part already for 30 years. And I was able to not only continue with the work that I had done in the organization, but I also had the backup of my associates, in terms of making sure that I had access to the material I needed to do my own research, my work. And I also had an audience around the world, who were very concerned with my situation, being in prison, but also interested in the output that I was able to generate while I was in prison.

In general, I think that my ability to sustain the level of work I did, while incarcerated, had a great deal to do with my love of music, and the fact that I had been involved in the process of developing music as a political weapon in America, in being a choir conductor, and a singer, and helping to build choruses around the country. But having imbued myself with works of the great Classical composers, and having had the great joy of conducting works by Bach, and Brahms, and Mozart, Beethoven, before I went to prison, I had in my heart

a quality of beauty that could not be taken away from me, that was not something that could be imprisoned.

Spannaus: No matter how ugly it was where you were.

Billington: Right. No matter the level of ugliness in which we had to live. And I think the greatest experience I had in prison was when one of my co-defendants, who was with me for about a year and a half, Paul Gallagher, and I, at one of the prisons, were able to form a prisoners' chorus, in which we sang many things, including Beethoven's Prisoners' Chorus, from *Fidelio*. And in doing that, in introducing Classical music into that environment, we were able to bring a level of freedom and joy to, especially those who participated, but others as well. That was a demonstration, I think, of the unconquerable spirit of the human mind and human heart.

Spannaus: As I understand it, that was even a problem sometimes with the prison authorities—I mean, they don't like prisoners doing something ugly, nasty, and threatening, but when they do something beautiful, it's just as threatening, or something of that sort.

Billington: Well, actually, they like having prisoners sit around destroying their minds in front of the television, and they don't mind occasional fights, and they don't mind if people take a little drugs, because it generally keeps them deadened. But, if somebody does something which starts to demonstrate freedom of the mind, that generally provokes a counter-motion by the authorities, and it was a problem.

Spannaus: I think this should be a lesson to people on the outside, so to speak, that it is the intention of the oligarchy to have a culture which deadens people's minds, and if Classical music, as we in the LaRouche movement propose, undergoes a resurgence generally, this is considered a threat by the oligarchy. People will be happy, thinking and fighting.

Billington: I believe that's absolutely the case.

Spannaus: Now, the other thing that you were heavily involved in, or at least are known for, while you were in prison, as a major contribution, was work on the philosophy and history of Asia—China, U.S. policy toward Asia in the Second World War, and prior to that. Could you give us a little idea of what was involved there?

Billington: Well, I had had some work in Asia, before I went to prison, but when I went, I decided that, given—

Spannaus: But, you know some languages, right? You were in Thailand—

Billington: I had lived in Thailand, and I had done some work on Asian political intelligence for *EIR*. But I had not done any in-depth research on history and philosophy of China, or any part of Asia, not in any depth. But given the long sentence, and knowing that I had a very long stretch ahead of me, I decided that I needed some focussed work, and

I chose to do that, and it was one of the great decisions of my life. And I was able to spend a great deal of time studying, especially, the Classics of Chinese culture, Chinese Confucian culture. One of my co-defendants in the Federal case, Will Wertz, who's one of the editors of *Fidelio* magazine, that's published by the LaRouche organization, had, during his incarceration, done a great deal of work on, especially, Nicolaus of Cusa, and other of the great thinkers of the Western Renaissance. And in my reviewing his work, Cusa's work and Will's work on Cusa, as well as reading LaRouche's writings of that period, I was able to utilize that, in going back and reading Confucius, and Mencius, and the Song Dynasty Confucian Renaissance, in the 12th Century, in China, especially the work of Zhu Xi, in a way which was tremendously exciting, first of all.

And I vividly remember sitting in one of these squalid cells, propped up on the one plastic chair, with my feet on the commode, in the middle of the night, with a bare bulb, reading 12th-Century Confucian scholarship, with a tremendous sense of excitement. That was really one of the periods in which I had the greatest sense of joy; where I made some fundamental discoveries, as a result of being able to recognize what Leibniz had recognized in his study of China, back in the 17th Century, which was, that you're looking at Chinese antiquity as a culture which had developed even beyond that of Europe at the time. And that this in itself, the cultured cities, the educational system, demonstrated that they had made discoveries of the fundamental truths, which had been made in Western civilization, and demonstrated its highest point in the Renaissance. That recognition—and therefore the necessity to find those connecting points, between the great cultures of East and West—became my own passion, to follow up the work that Leibniz had done three centuries earlier.

And I think I was able to make a certain breakthrough in that work, which had not been done by others, which in that way, generated out to the world, through the organization's publication of these works, and the publication of them in journals by other nations around the world, which was, I think, the thing that most demonstrated to me, and to others around the world, that there's no way that being imprisoned can capture, or destroy, the creative powers of the mind.

Spannaus: Now, I want to go totally somewhere different. Just because I think it might make a connection to what some of our viewers are aware, which is back to the United States, on a totally different level. As I understand it, and as people can learn more by reading in the book, one of the heavy motivating factors for your being targeted for such a long prison term, which was not only because of your prominence in the LaRouche political movement, but was because you had gone toe to toe, so to speak, with Ollie North, and that particular political machine, a pretty nasty part of the Bush machine; we called him a "son-of-a-Bush"; we now have the real "son of the Bush" in the White House. But I wonder if you could

touch on that briefly, just as a reminder to our readers as we enter this era, of what this was all about.

Billington: Well, we had, through many of our publications, exposed the fact that the so-called Project Democracy, which was run by George Bush from his "Presidency of vice" in the White House, and Ollie as part of that, had been involved in some of the most despicable gun-running, drug-running operations, throughout Ibero-America, and elsewhere in the world. And our exposure of that irked some people, and made them particularly upset about the work that we were doing. When at a certain point, we were in contact with some of the people that were being scammed by Ollie North, who were being led to turn over large sums of money to finance the so-called Contra operation, certainly not knowing that what they were financing was a drug-running scam, we had a certain hand in unravelling that particular scam, that particular operation, and I was involved in that. And there's no question but that the targeting of me, in several of the prosecutions that were brought—I was the only one who was convicted in both a Federal and a state case, and therefore had to serve two different sentences—had a great deal to do with the fact that I had irked some of the Bush-North-Project Democracy apparatus, and exposed a great deal of the criminality behind that.

Which certainly has a great deal to do with the fact that we have a new President coming in, or potentially coming in.

Spannaus: It probably also means that some people are very unhappy you're out of prison, but that's good for them.

Billington: I tried make them as sorry as I possibly could that they had put me in prison.

Spannaus: Right, that's true—

Billington: I'll try to make it even worse now.

Spannaus: Just to conclude. You've not been able to get around too much since you've been out of prison, but you've had some interchange with people, in meetings in Virginia and New York, and so forth. I wonder if you could characterize for our viewers, some of the response that you've gotten to your situation, and the book.

Billington: Well, I'm happy with the response from the book, because what I've heard from people—not always directly, but through people who talk to their friends and supporters, who then report back what they think, having read the book. It's enlightening to many of them to see what we have been through. It's a very personal book, and it's certainly unique to my character, and my development, the way in which I developed my ideas, those that I got from LaRouche, those I got from Leibniz, and those that I discovered by reading ancient Chinese culture.

But it surprises people to see both the activities we were involved in, and the development of the ideas, having to do with Plato and Leibniz, and Cusa, and Kepler, and so forth.

And in that way, in a certain sense, it's a book about everybody who's part of this, this fight for the truth, this fight for a Renaissance. And the only reason that I happened to write it, is that I had the time. I was given the time, to write what many people could have written, and each would have been different and unique, but in a certain sense, it is a history of each of us who've joined this fight.

Spannaus: Well, I know that the one response that I got that was most impressive, was, people saying that they finally have a different, and more sensuous, idea of what it means to be a part of this movement, because somehow when they read LaRouche, it seems . . . they think it's above them, and he's a great man, who's taking responsibility for the world, and who knows where he comes from—I don't know, from the head of Zeus, or something. But you, you're a person who in the book is identified as coming from a Midwest town they know, who's grown up in the same period that they may have grown up in, has references that they can address, and this makes them understand, and actually, as far as I can see, be much more committed to ensuring that our country goes in the direction that the LaRouche movement is fighting for.

So, I want to thank you very much, and we'll hope to have you back again.

Stop Tommy Thompson Nomination for HHS

by Marianna Wertz

While stopping George W. Bush's nomination of John Ashcroft as Attorney General is of the utmost strategic importance, Bush's nomination of Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson for Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) is also of great importance, if the nation is not to descend into what Lyndon LaRouche has warned will be America's equivalent of Nazi-style fascism. Yet, while major Democratic constituency groups, including organized labor and African-Americans, succeeded in blocking the horrendous choice of Linda Chavez at Labor, and these groups have mobilized to stop Ashcroft's nomination, there is virtually no opposition on the horizon to Thompson.

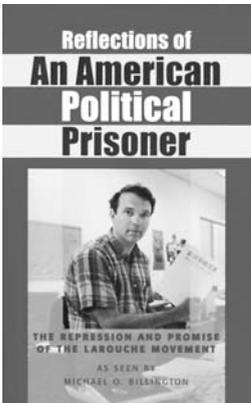
If ever a fox has been put in charge of the chicken coop, that is what putting Thompson in charge of HHS, the nation's largest civilian agency, would do. The media are touting Thompson as a "reformer," who has "revolutionized" his state's welfare system, and will bring the same kind of innovations to the Federal level at HHS. However, just a cursory glance at what he has done in his 14-year term as Governor of Wisconsin indicates that Thompson's commitment is not to the "general welfare," but rather to the complete privatization of all government services, including prisons and welfare services, and to the installation of his cronies in top positions of the private companies that administer the government funds. The result is the lowest welfare rolls in the nation, but former welfare recipients have been thrown on the scrap heap, and the rates of incarceration and racial division are among the highest in the nation.

Driving Down the Standard of Living

Among Thompson's first acts as governor (he was elected in 1986), was to launch Learnfare, the first welfare program in the country to withhold parents' cash benefits if their children skipped too much school.

Thompson also pioneered legislation that penalized women who have another baby while on welfare.

In 1982, Wisconsin became the first state to ask HHS for permission to end welfare as an entitlement, creating a two-year time limit for assistance, which was later the model for the Federal welfare policy that President Clinton, under Al Gore's and "triangulator" Dick Morris's influence, signed in 1996. Under that welfare policy, known as Wisconsin Works,



Political Prisoners in America??

You bet there are.

Michael Billington was sentenced to 77 years in prison, for refusing to go against the truth. Read *Reflections of an American Political Prisoner: The Repression and Promise of the LaRouche Movement*.

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