



the village **VOICE**



[home](#)

[radio](#)

[classifieds](#)

[features](#)

[citystate](#)

[hot spot](#)

[nation](#)

[ny mirror](#)

[sports](#)

[art](#)

[books](#)

[dance](#)

[film/movieclock](#)

[music](#)

[theater](#)

[horoscope](#)

[the best of nyc](#)

[eats](#)

[nightguide](#)

[letters](#)

[personals](#)

[voice store](#)

[about us](#)

[work at the voice](#)

nation ●●●

Nat Hentoff

War Among Civil Libertarians

A Rigged Board Election at the NYCLU?

August 16th, 2002 5:30 PM



Michael Meyers: His only party line is the Bill of Rights. (photo by Statia Molewski)

Michael Meyers, a nationally recognized civil rights and civil liberties leader, appears regularly in the *New York Post*. The headline on his July 15 column was "Hypocrites!" The subhead: "N.Y.'s 'free-speech' elite just purged this gadfly."

Mike began his account of his "de-election" from the board of the New York Civil Liberties Union by saying: "I insisted on speaking my mind, which offended the 'free-speech' mavens. So I got clobbered by insiders in a sneak contested election that was fraught with suppressed ballots and election irregularities."

I have known Mike and been his friend for more than 20 years. I first covered him as a reporter, then worked with him on civil rights and civil liberties battles. He is one of those people who exemplify how a life of unbending integrity and independence can be lived in a time of slippery "postmodern" values. Another is Steve Bright, head of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, who works to rescue inmates from death rows while also getting courts to root out Dickensian prison conditions.

There is also Dr. Kenneth Clark, who, like Mike Meyers, has spent his life fighting racism, and insisting that the only just society is an integrated one.

Mike grew up in Harlem, and in high school was mentored by Kenneth Clark. He went on to become assistant director of the NAACP, during the tenures of Roy Wilkins and Benjamin Hooks. For more than 20 years since, Mike has been on the board of directors of both the NYCLU and the national ACLU. In both organizations, he has held nearly every high-level position there is.

He is also president and executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition, which, among other activities, runs a citywide, school-based program, "Unlearning Stereotypes—Civil Rights and Race Relations." Biracial teams of community and civic leaders, as well as law students, get youngsters

To advertise in Nation contact [us](#).

VOICE Giveaways

Film

- Passes to see *Igby Goes Down*

[click links to win!](#)

[make us your homepage](#)

[most popular today](#)

[most emailed](#)

involved in unbridled discussions on all kinds of stereotyping and discrimination.

Mike and I are also on the board of F.I.R.E. (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), which, with full force, defends the free-speech and due-process rights of students and professors on campuses throughout the country against repression by politically correct and craven administrators. It doesn't matter to F.I.R.E. whether the views under attack are from the right or the left.

I give you this background on Mike Meyers to show that he is no crank. I know many of the people who are active in civil liberties around the country, and Mike, for years, has been among the most persistent—and outspoken. He has no party line, except that of the Bill of Rights, and he is never silent out of loyalty to an institution, including the ACLU, when he believes he has evidence it is acting in violation of civil liberties.

After Mike's *New York Post* column was printed, two members of the NYCLU board who are also major players on the national ACLU board—Susan Herman and Jeremiah Gutman—sent an indictment of Mike to every member of the national body. As a result, some of the national board members have told Mike that they will not vote for his re-election to that national body. This de-election of Mike Meyers has clearly become a problem of fairness for the national ACLU because, in my view, its own electoral processes are now also involved.

The ACLU nationally continues to be the most important single organization working to awaken Americans to the continuing Bush-Ashcroft assaults on the Bill of Rights, and so its own integrity with regard to the free-speech rights of this highly effective national board member must not be compromised.

The ACLU has a mechanism whereby its national leadership can—and should—conduct a public investigation of Mike's charges as well as hear the answers of those on the ACLU board who choose to say something. I have contacted the major officials in the NYCLU, but as of this writing I have received no responses from anyone there. The national leadership of the ACLU should undertake that investigation, sooner rather than later, so that it can then concentrate all its resources on protecting the liberties of the rest of us. This is especially true with Ashcroft increasingly out of control.

In addition to claiming that there were irregularities in the election that removed him from the NYCLU board, Mike charged in the *New York Post* column that ignited this war that he was being retaliated against for opposing the permanent appointment of Donna Lieberman as the executive director. He contends that the national search for the successor to Norman Siegel was a "sham" and that "a better-suited, more articulate and smarter black woman candidate" was passed over.

There is one of his charges with which I disagree. In the column, he questions "the efficacy of [the NYCLU's] educational equity suit, which champions the dubious remedy of putting more money into the pockets of those responsible for failing public schools."

As Wayne Barrett noted in his valuable July 9 *Voice* column, the recent appellate court decision on public school financing is unconscionable. The judges ruled that all New York State is obligated to do is supply enough financial resources to provide public school students with an *eighth-grade education*. (Which schools do these judges' kids go to?) The Campaign for Fiscal Equity's current appeal to the state's Court of Appeals could not be more crucial for millions of New York children.

Governor Pataki said he was "pleased" by the disgraceful lower court ruling.

Getting back to Mike's charges against the NYCLU: Susan Herman, a professor

at Brooklyn Law School, whom I've consulted on constitutional questions, is a member of both the NYCLU and ACLU boards, and is one of four ACLU general counsels. She has accused Mike Meyers—in a letter to him and then to the entire national ACLU board—of having "breached [his] fiduciary obligation of confidentiality" as an NYCLU board member in his criticism of the NYCLU in the *New York Post*. So much for free speech and press.

Harvey Silverglate, a nationally prominent constitutional lawyer who is also active in the ACLU, says: "Mike's fiduciary responsibility as a board member is to NYCLU members *outside the board and to the public*." Susan Herman herself concedes in her letter to Mike that "the procedures surrounding this election were far from perfect." Should such an admission, and a seriously challenged search for an NYCLU executive director, be kept from public view by a *civil liberties organization*?

[Letter to the Editor](#) | [E-Mail Story](#) | [Voice Newsletter](#)

Recent Nat Hentoff columns

- [War Among Civil Libertarians](#) A Rigged Board Election at the NYCLU?
- [Joe Lieberman Joins Big Brother](#) The Return of the Thought Police
- [Ashcroft's Master Plan to Spy on Us](#) 'Citizens Will Not Become Informants'
- [A Reporter as Prosecutor](#) Managing News at 'The New Yorker'
- [No Peace, No Justice](#) As a Juror, How Would You Vote?

Receive an alert every time Nat Hentoff is posted.

Email address:

[Features](#) | [CityState](#) | [Hot Spot](#) | [Letters](#) | [Nation](#) | [NY Mirror](#) | [Sports](#) | [Art](#) | [Books](#) | [Dance](#) | [Film](#) | [Music](#) | [Theater](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Personals](#) | [Eats](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Cover Credits](#) | [Home](#)