Ron Paul and Guy Fawkes

It was a historic event indeed, demonstrating — much to the chagrin of the mainstream media that with every Paul success breathlessly declares that he can't possibly win — that the doctor does indeed have real support that goes far beyond an alleged "criminal botnet." More to the point, the fundraising success of November 5 suggests Paul was likely right when he told Jay Leno "there probably is a risk I could win."

Unsurprisingly, those elements of the mainstream media that deal more with propaganda than responsible journalism jumped at the opportunity to denigrate Paul's fundraising success by alleging that the 21st century presidential candidate was cavorting, metaphorically anyway, with an unrepentant 17th century terrorist. The *Washington Post's* Chris Cillizza referred to the "semi-creepiness of choosing Guy Fawkes Day to make an online fundraising statement." Meanwhile, a writer for the *Huffington Post* fretted over the fundraising effort's "worrisome invocation of Fawkes" and at Michelle Malkin's "Hot Air" blog a headline screamed: "Ron and the Paulbots celebrate a terrorist." Even the Brits were getting in on the act, with the *London Times* no less declaring that Fawkes, a "mercenary and terrorist" had become "an unlikely figurehead for a US Republican presidential candidate."

This was a drumbeat that continued even a full week after the Paul "money bomb" event had succeeded in raising over $4 million. On the evening of November 12, CNN's Glenn Beck introduced his program with a smear of Ron Paul and anyone who supports Paul. The heart of the smear was, essentially, that by tacitly accepting donations from a fundraising drive tied, however loosely, to Guy Fawkes, Paul was associated with modern day domestic proto-terrorists.

Paul's supporters "raised the cash on November the 5th to commemorate Guy Fawkes," Beck gravely intoned on his program. "This guy was a British terrorist who tried to overthrow the government by blowing up Parliament and killing everybody in it. Paul's supporters called the donations, and I'm quoting, a 'money bomb.' Fawkes was caught the very last minute, some say with his hand on a torch about to light the gunpowder under Parliament. Now, the vast majority of Paul's supporters take this little metaphor the way it's intended, as a rallying cry to create a dramatic political shift. It's really not the way I would go, you know, tying my movement in with a historical terrorist attack, especially in post-9/11 America. But hey, you know, I'm a libertarian at heart. I get it. You raise money however you want, as long as you're not blowing other people up."

In all of this frantic hyperbole about Ron Paul and Guy Fawkes, there is the stench of something either ignorant or dishonest. How many people in the media know enough about the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century in England — or in Europe as a whole — to make rational moral judgments concerning those who lived at that time? Moreover, if they are ignorant of the attitudes and events of that age, now 400 years distant in time from the present, are they in any position to impugn the character of a present day politician and his supporters by making reference to obscure and poorly understood events from that past, antique age? At the very least, if they wish do so, honesty requires that they also provide their listeners and readers with an accurate and detailed description of the people, politics and overall cultural milieu of the time period in question.

Of course, that hasn't happened because the media is more interested in sensationalism and political propaganda than it is in providing an accurate picture from history. Sound bites are easy, history is hard. But if we are to speak rationally about the past and its supposed connection to the present, we have to do the hard work and go back in time to find out what really happened. So, who was this Guy

Fawkes, the man that makes us "remember, remember the fifth of November?"

A New King

It's tough to follow a legend in office, and that was the prospect that faced James VI, the king of Scotland, when Queen Elizabeth's life and reign came to an end in the spring of 1603. The great Queen, childless, had named no heir, but rumor had it that on her deathbed she had indicated that James of Scotland should take her place. The new king had his supporters and his detractors, but succession was largely peaceful and all England submitted to the new King James I.

The kingdom James now ruled had known more than a measure of success under Elizabeth. But the achievements of her reign formed but a thin veneer over a society in which sectarian conflict still seethed. Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had broken with the Catholic Church over matters both political and marital. That break had led to the growth of Protestant power in England, particularly in the cities. The more rural areas of England were less inclined to enjoy the change, and violence followed as first one side, then the other, gained the upper hand. After Henry's death in 1547, according to historian F.E. Halliday, "There followed a disastrous decade, a violent oscillation impelled by greed and fanaticism, out to an extreme Protestantism and back to a medieval Catholicism. Discord in religion and its exploitation for political ends were now to make the crea-tion of order still more difficult." The kingdom was wracked by a nightmare of violent and hellish atrocities.

Into this, finally, stepped Elizabeth. "She herself had no strong religious convictions," Halliday wrote in his book *England: A Concise History*. "For her the matter was primarily a political one, and she aimed at a compromise that would unite as many of her people as possible." That compromise resulted in once again severing ties with the Papacy. Peace was achieved, but a large body of Catholics remained and, as Halliday notes, "the next twenty years were a period of Catholic intrigue…."

It would thus take a delicate touch to succeed Elizabeth without unleashing a new wave of sectarian violence. James I lacked that touch. "Fate," Halliday quipped, "could scarcely have sent a more inappropriate monarch than James to rule England at this juncture."

There was, nevertheless, cause for cautious optimism as James rode into England. In his great study *England Under the Stuarts*, historian G.M. Trevelyan noted:

> The man on whom the English thus first set eyes was by no means contemptible in per-son, in spite of grossly coarse manners. In the prime of life, over middle height, a good horseman, devoted to the chase, drinking hugely but never overcome by his liquour: he employed a pithy wit and wealth of homely images and learned conceits in free and familiar discourse with all. Nor during the progress did he dispel the prejudice in his favour.

For the observant, however, there were warning signs. Trevelyan noted that the new king "knew nothing of the peculiar laws and liberties of England, either in the spirit or the letter." When a thief was caught amongst a crowd as he passed by, the new king ordered the man summarily hanged. "Constitutional custom and Parliamentary priviledge "were to the new king, Trevelyan observed, "tiresome anomalies hampering Government in its benevolent course."

James, indeed, was an aspiring dictator, a man who believed himself to be an all-powerful monarch, justified in his regal splendor by the divine right of kings. "Kings are justly called gods," he wrote, "for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth: for if you will consider the attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a king. God hath power to create or destroy make or unmake at his pleasure, to give life or send death, to judge all and to be judged nor

accountable to none; to raise low things and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both souls and body due. And the like power have kings: they make and unmake their subjects, they have power of raising and casting down, of life and of death, judges over all their subjects and in all causes and yet accountable to none but God only…."

At the time of his ascension to the English throne, the kingdom was populated by a large minority of Catholics who felt themselves unjustly oppressed, mixed amongst a Protestant majority almost paralyzed by fear of Catholic intrigue from within and invasion from without. The new king's belief that he was as a god within his kingdom, accountable to no man or law save himself, was a spark almost certain to set off a social conflagration.

Time of Trouble

Perhaps there is no one who could have done better under the circumstances than the new king. Still, in amazingly rapid succession he proceeded to make one mistake after another. "All the main causes that twice combined to drive the Stuarts from the throne," Trevelyan wrote, "were in three fatal years set in motion by an overwise king."

One of these was his antagonism of the Catholic minority. Even this, though, could not have been immediately foreseen. Initially, Catholics had reason to cheer the new ruler. In 1604, James negotiated a peace with Catholic Spain, ending, said Halliday "twenty years of war." Prior to James' ascension, at the time Elizabeth died, "there was not an important town in England where a Catholic priest could prudently have shown himself in the streets," Trevelyan wrote. So even a settlement of the war with Spain could have been viewed as a thaw, of sorts.

If so, it was short lived. The continuing practice of recusancy, compelling Catholics to attend Protestant services or pay a steep fine, brought about great financial hardship as "farmers and laborers who decidedly preferred the old forms of worship, were deprived of their rites and ministers, and ruined by spies, pursuivants and bad neighbours, who carried off their goods under cover of collecting recusancy fines, till one by one they gave up the struggle and conformed."

It should be noted in this context that James was not above antagonizing Protestants who had the temerity to question the established church. He was particularly at issue with the Puritans who he derisively called "a sect rather than a religion." In 1604, he warned that he would "make them conform themselves, or else will harry them out of the land." This set in motion events and persecutions that would culminate in the flight of many Puritans to the new world, where they became better known as Pilgrims.

One of those who fled was William Bradford, a man celebrated in America as one of the Pilgrim Fathers and whose proclamation of Thanksgiving in the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts is still celebrated as a favorite national holiday each November. It was Bradford also who participated in the drafting of the Mayflower Compact and was the second to sign that document famously promising "to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony." In his journal *Of Plimouth Plantation*, Bradford recalled the treatment of the Puritan "separatists" under James. They were, he said, "hunted & persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions were but as flea-bitings in comparison of these which now came upon them. For some were taken & clapt up in prison, others had their houses besett & watcht night and day, & hardly escaped their hands…."

Meanwhile, the Catholics of the country lived through an ongoing and fluctuating persecution of their

own. Priests said Mass secretly at times, more openly at others. For a time it would be dan-gerous to be a Catholic. At other times, and sometimes in other places, it was a mark of distinction and honor. Embodied in the Penal Code, Trevelyan wrote, the persecution was irregular in its working. "It was at no moment … completely enforced…. The degree of its enforcement varied continually in respect to persons, places and times."

This unfair and capricious system was nonetheless oppressive, its variety in application notwith-standing. Catholics, Trevelyan noted, "were made to confine their activity and influence to their own estates, by laws which excluded them from any post in national or local government, and even forbade them to travel five miles from their place of residence without licenses signed by neighboring magistrates."

For their part, the Catholics were not wholly innocent. A radical party, led by the Jesuits, sought the reconversion, by the sword if necessary, of the kingdom. The use of foreign troops from Catholic Europe was not out of the question. Thus the two sides, Protestant and Catholic, hardened one against the other and the position of the crown was made yet more precarious. "Here was a vicious circle," Trevelyan noted. "The Jesuit policy induced statesmen to prevent the spread of Catholicism by the Penal Laws; but the Penal Laws, because they prevented the spread of Catholicism, could well justify to any whole-hearted Catholic the Jesuit policy."

Early on, James had appeased the Catholics by renewing diplomatic ties with Rome. This was viewed by many Catholics as a promise of toleration. Maybe the recusancy fines would no longer be collected. Such hopes, however, were dashed and even a group of moderate Catholics, feeling betrayed, hatched a plot to abduct the new king. The plot was relayed to the King by none other than the Jesuit faction in both a betrayal and a stroke of subversive genius. James, thinking as a result that he could trust the Jesuits, did finally implement a plan of toleration in re-sponse. Catholicism would be tolerated, so long as Catholics pledged their loyalty to the king and their numbers kept in check.

The Jesuits, for their part, had no intention of declaring their loyalty to the king. But more alarming to the Protestants was the sudden rush of formerly hidden Catholics flocking to services and gatherings that were no longer suppressed. "Whole neighborhoods were alarmed," Trevelyan noted, "by great gatherings of Catholic devotees…. James, terrified at the phantoms his first stroke of kingcraft had conjured up" abruptly reversed course in his policies. "In February 1604 a proclamation appeared ordering all priests to quit the country; in August several were hanged by judges on the circuit, though without instructions from the government; in November the levy of fines from lay recusants was vigorously resumed; in December five men were mining a tunnel from a neighboring cellar to the wall of Parliament House."

Gunpowder Treason

The Catholic rebellion was hatched by Robert Catesby. Intelligent, industrious, and well educated, Catesby came from a notable family. A distant ancestor had served as councilor to King Richard III; his father, a staunch Catholic, suffered repeatedly for his faith, something that probably left a strong impression on young Robert. As a young man, he was, an acquaintance that knew him well said, "more than ordinarily well-proportioned, some six feet tall, of good carriage and handsome countenance. He was grave in manner, but attractively so. He was considered one of the most dashing and courageous horsemen in the country."

But even toward the end of Elizabeth’s reign, he was suspected by the government. In 1596 he was

arrested and imprisoned for a time in the infamous Tower of London. It was likely that he was not entirely innocent. In succeeding years, Catesby was involved in several intrigues attempting to overthrow the government that was oppressing Catholics.

When, with other Catholics, his final hopes for tolerance under James were dashed, he resolved to lead a plot to overthrow the government for good. This would be accomplished beginning with one remarkable act of violence by destroying Parliament and the king in an instant with a gun-powder fueled explosion. Catesby hoped, Trevelyan wrote, that the "disorganization that would follow the death of King, Lords and Commons together, would create a moment during which the Catholics could rebel with some chance of success." According to the Gunpowder Plot Society, an historical society dedicated to researching the uprising, "Catesby felt that 'the nature of the disease required so sharp a remedy', and that the Plot was a morally justifiable act of self-defence against the oppressive rule of a tyrant."

Catesby gathered about himself a group of conspirators. Of them, Trevelyan retrospectively judged that their motives were pure. "They were," the great British historian judged, "pure from self-interest and love of power. It is difficult to detect any stain upon their conduct, except the one monstrous illusion that murder is right.... "

The estimable group so gathered included, with Catesby, Robert Winter, Christopher and John Wright, Thomas Percy, Thomas Winter, and finally the famous Guido — better known to history as Guy — Fawkes. This latter was a soldier who had been serving with other English Catholics in Flanders. Skilled at siege warfare, he knew how to tunnel safely and accurately. Following his direction, the conspirators began tunneling toward the foundation of Parliament from the cellar of a nearby building.

Breaching the 9-foot-thick foundation wall of Parliament, though, was a daunting task that would take months of hard labor, with discovery of the tunnel always a looming threat. The conspirators worked quickly and quietly nevertheless until one day, while hard at work on the task, they heard a sound above their heads. Fearing discovery, only Fawkes had the courage to seek the source of the sound, which on investigation turned out to be a woman working in a lumber room located immediately below the House of Lords.

What was imagined to be a disaster for the conspirators turned out to be, at first blush, a lucky break. The room, it was learned, might be available for lease. A deal was soon struck: "In these new premises, obtained on lease by Percy, Fawkes stored thirty-six barrels of gunpowder, strewed them with great bars of iron to break the roof in pieces and concealed the whole under piles of firewood," Trevelyan wrote. "The useless mine below was left unfinished, and the conspirators dispersed for six months."

The Final Act

As far as conspiracies go, this one was bulletproof: the powder was in place, the meeting of Par-liament and king to come in due course. All that remained was to light the fuse and change Eng-land — and quite likely much else in subsequent history — forever. All that was required was secrecy until the appointed hour.

However good the plotters may have been at siege warfare and the use of explosive ordnance, secrecy was not their strong suit. Feeling that their Catholic brethren, particularly the Jesuits, should be warned ahead of time about the coming chaos, the plotters divulged their secret. Moreover, they also arranged, according to Trevelyan, for others "to prepare a rising to coincide with the explosion." One of the new accessories to the planned crime, being related to several men in the House of Lords, arranged to have warning of the design revealed in key parts by a letter that eventually made its way into the

hands of the king's closest advisors.

Thus warned that something was afoot, on November 4th — the day before Parliament was to meet and be destroyed — Fawkes was with the explosives in the leased room waiting for the ap-pointed hour when a member of the Privy Council entered the room and asked who owned the wood and other items stacked inside. After the interview, Trevelyan notes, any other man would have fled, thinking that he had been found out. Iron-nerved, Fawkes stayed anyway, hoping he'd yet get the chance to carry out the plan. It wasn't to be. A short time later, the king's men returned to the room, knocked down Fawkes and bound him and the plot was foiled.

Fawkes was dragged off to the infamous Tower of London, but his fellow conspirators attempted to raise the planned rebellion despite his capture. By and large, the support they thought was assured to them, failed to materialize. Those of the rebels that did appear were rapidly caught. Catesby and some of the others died in a hail of gunfire. Others were captured and taken, said Trevelyan, "to trial and death in London."

Meanwhile, Fawkes remained alive in the Tower of London, but his last days were anything but pleasant. The Tower remains notorious today for its use as a torture chamber. Here just a few years earlier in 1597, a certain Jesuit Priest named Gerard, charged with attempting the overthrow Queen Elizabeth, was tortured using the manacles. He survived and wrote an account of his treatment in the Tower. After his arms were placed in the manacles, he was hung by them from a bracket on a tall wooden pillar. Recounting the experience, Father Gerard wrote: "I could hardly utter ... words, such a gripping pain came over me. It was worst in my chest and belly, my hands and arms. All the blood in my body seemed to rush up into my arms and hands and I thought that blood was oozing from the ends of my fingers and the pores of my skin. But it was only a sensation caused by my flesh swelling above the irons holding them."

Other horrors, like the rack which caused intense pain by pulling the joints apart, and the "Scavenger's daughter" which caused the body to be so compressed that blood flowed from the nose and ears, awaited those held inside. These infernal devices and likely many others were used on Fawkes. According to Trevelyan, "under repeated tortures [Fawkes] was day by day yielding up to the Council the story of the plot." The torture and imprisonment continued until February, when on the first, the unfortunate Fawkes was led to the scaffold where he was to be hanged with other conspirators then drawn and quartered. In a final act of defiance, he escaped the worst of this barbaric punishment by jumping from the scaffold and breaking his neck.

Fawkes in Historical Perspective

Now, as America itself wonders how to grapple with actual terrorists and struggles with the Bush administration's use of torture, a reassessment of Fawkes is underway. While the Ron Paul campaign did not encourage the use of Guy Fawkes as a fund raising device, it did not turn from the prospect either. And in the pages of *Harper's* magazine, author Scott Horton has also questioned the old, simplistic view of Fawkes as traitor, noting, "Today Guy Fawkes is increasingly viewed as the heroic figure prepared to stand against an unjust and oppressive state, as a martyr and a victim of torture."

Clearly, the government of James I was an equal opportunity despoiler of the rights and freedoms of the people. But, for the age, it was not unique in that respect. Europe at this time was a cesspool of barbarity and oppression and any person or group of individuals that sought any semblance of the freedoms we now take for granted were ruthlessly suppressed. It is a wonder that the Pilgrims escaped.

We celebrate the Pilgrims and with good reason. But what of Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder conspirators? Until recently, they were viewed with scorn as traitors and criminals. But were they really? We should deplore the means they chose to effect their planned revolution, but we should use care in how we criticize them lest we indict ourselves.

After all, less than 200 years after Fawkes dove from the scaffolding to his demise, men like George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin did themselves first plot, then carry out, treason against the British king, and their violent revolution brought forth something unprecedented in history: a new nation uniquely conceived in liberty. As we approach Thanksgiving, much thanks is indeed due to our forefathers for their perseverance and determination to escape the clutches of the king.