

CORRELATION DOES NOT EQUAL KOCHNATION

I wasn't going to write a post debunking this Nation article on the opposition to gate grope. Sure, it was a specious hit on John Tyner, the "Don't touch my junk" dude. But I figured as soon as anyone read this passage:

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.

Readers would just dismiss the entire article as so sloppy to be embarrassing. I mean, did the Nation really insinuate that everyone who goes to a private Christian school and everyone who lives in Oceanside, CA, including the thousands of Marines stationed at Pendleton, have suspect political opinions? Hey, I live in an even stronger Republican stronghold next to these guys, who just got listed as a hate group. I guess that means all my political beliefs should be assumed to be hateful, huh? Serves me right for living close to my husband's job.

But after reading the authors' response to Glenn Greenwald's critique of the article, I thought a more detailed response was worth doing.

You see, Mark Ames and Yasha Levine claim their only mistake in the first article—one they don't find all that egregious—was in insinuating certain things about Tyner. But they suggest their underlying point—that we should question "the official narrative" about the opposition to gate grope—is still valid.

Greenwald's column raises one potentially valid criticism of our article—our treatment of John Tyner, the self-described libertarian and "don't touch my junk" hero of the anti-TSA protests. Based on reporting from the

San Diego Union-Tribune, we speculated that Tyner may have set up his taped encounter with TSA agents—a claim that we also quote Tyner denying. We did not, however, claim that Tyner was affiliated with the Astroturf and/or Koch-funded groups mentioned later in the piece, and indeed we noted directly that Tyner denied any such associations in an interview with *The Nation*. In retrospect, our article was less than clear about Tyner's lack of Astroturf affiliations, and we regret in particular including extraneous details from the *Union-Tribune* article about Tyner's past—that he went to a private Christian school and lived in a Republican community near a Marine base—because it distracted readers like Greenwald from the article's main findings.

We believe that Tyner is in all likelihood innocent in his motives, but our larger point is that his discourse and the movement that has embraced it is far from innocent. In focusing entirely on our characterization of Tyner, Greenwald ignores the larger thrust of our argument and the vast majority of the evidence assembled in the piece, leaving a distorted impression of it.

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. What our article did was look beyond the obvious surface, into possible reasons why this particular issue suddenly rose to forefront of the national debate, when dozens of other, more pressing issues are getting so little attention—people being kicked out of their homes and living on the street

because of fraudulent foreclosures, a massive wealth transfer from struggling Americans to the financial sector, ongoing wars that are bankrupting the country and killing thousands, the attack on public education and so on.

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Which means it’s probably worthwhile to go back and point out how bizarrely bad the logic of their first article (and their response to Glenn) is.

Start with their basic project:

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[snip]

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They want to question “the official version” of why this particular issue “suddenly rose to forefront.”

At a threshold level, to prove their argument that something nefarious is afoot, they would need to start by dismissing other logical explanations for why this particular issue “suddenly rose to forefront.” Most obviously, they would need to dismiss the possibility that the opposition to gate grope rose so suddenly because the procedure at airport gates—the introduction of more RapeAScan machines and the related introduction of “enhanced pat-downs”—changed so suddenly. Unfortunately for them, that’s a pretty tough explanation to disprove. So they don’t even try. Their entire

effort ignores the most obvious explanation, that the timing is explained by changes in TSA procedure, and the response to it grew immediately after the changes were introduced.

But their project also relies on something else: the purported existence of “an official narrative.”

Now, to be fair, I agree that the media in this country often develop “a narrative.” I just wasn’t aware someone had started certifying certain narratives as “official” or not. I certainly wasn’t aware that someone had certified a narrative about this issue yet. But that brings us to the second problem with Ames and Levine’s argument. They don’t prove the existence of or even point to examples of the narrative they’re trying to debunk. That makes their job a lot easier, mind you, because they can just claim a narrative exists that says this was all a grassroots movement, without having to deal with the nuances or sources of any actual narrative itself. Heck, I might even agree that some entities are making claims about the opposition to gate grope that aren’t true. But then wouldn’t the more sound response be to point to actual examples of press coverage that made inaccurate statements, rather than just argue against a straw man narrative that it’s not entirely clear exists?

This problem with their argument is particularly important, because it brings us back to the centrality of Tyner in it. Their entire article is based on the media’s purported designation of Tyner as the hero of the movement.

Does anyone else sense something strange is going on with the apparently spontaneous revolt against the TSA? This past week, the media turned an “ordinary guy,” 31-year-old Californian John Tyner, who blogs under the pseudonym “Johnny Edge,” into a national hero after he posted a cell phone video of himself defending his liberty against the evil government oppressors in charge

of airport security.

Tyner is the only opponent to gate grope whom Ames and Levine suggest has been widely treated as the hero of opposition to gate grope. In fact, they seem to admit that Meg McLain pointedly wasn't because her claims were debunked.

Meg McLain almost became a national celebrity as the first victim of the body scanner/TSA molesters.

And they seem to admit that the other false heroes of opposition to gate grope were primarily promoted through Drudge.

McLain wasn't the only questionable libertarian "victim" of the TSA turned into a freedom-hero on the Drudge Report. In fact, according to the TSA's account, the 6-year-old who was allegedly "strip-searched" by evil TSA agents had his shirt removed by his own father—and not at the TSA's request. And the latest "hero" of the Drudge Report, Samuel Wolanyk—who stripped down to his underwear in alleged anger at TSA agents in San Diego, earning himself top billing on Drudge—is also a libertarian activist in the San Diego area, home of the self-described "libertarian" hero John Tyner, III.

The discrepancy in the media's treatment—with Tyner being widely treated as one symbol of this movement, but with others being promoted by Drudge but then debunked and largely ignored by the national media—undermines Ames and Levine's claim that there is an "official narrative." Rather, there is Drudge's narrative, and then there is the narrative that has survived media scrutiny.

Just as importantly, though, if Tyner is the only one sustainably picked up by the national

media, and the authors now admit he “is in all likelihood innocent in his motives,” then their entire argument falls apart, because the person they claim to be most central in the national media is—according to Ames and Levine—just what their purported official narrative says he is, a citizen legitimately objecting to this treatment.

But of course, Tyner is not the only one whose story has been picked up by the national media. Which brings us to the other big problem with Ames and Levine’s argument. Perhaps the person whose story has generated the most outrage is not Tyner, but Thomas Sawyer, the man whose urostomy bag burst during a patdown. Mind you, he’s not involved in what Ames and Levine depict as the opposition to gate grope, though he has said he’d like to work with the TSA to be more understanding of people who rely on medical devices. But that doesn’t negate his justifiable frustration at his treatment, his public exposure of that treatment, nor the power that his story has in generating opposition to the TSA procedures.

But Ames and Levine don’t treat Sawyer’s treatment, or the way his treatment has mobilized opposition. They don’t treat a bunch of other people with bad stories about the TSA that have gotten publicity. They also don’t acknowledge the existence of anyone aside from a few libertarians mobilizing against this treatment.

In other words, they cherry pick the people they want to call “this movement,” and then unsurprisingly prove (or rather, insinuate) that those cherry picked people have suspect motives. Or live in San Diego or work for dentists, which is apparently suspect in itself.

Now, even assuming the legitimacy of libertarians’ political activism really is suspect if those libertarians have ties to organizations funded by the Koch brothers (given that a number of my long-term allies in the larger civil liberties movement have gotten Koch

cash, I'm not willing to go that far; also note, they only substantiate Koch ties for McLain and John Mica's Chief of Staff, as well as one person whom they don't claim has anything to do with the opposition to gate grope), discrediting the diverse opposition to gate grope because of the involvement of Meg McLain in it is like discrediting a million person anti-war rally because three hundred people from ANSWER had a role in organizing it.

Now don't get me wrong. It is important to call attention to the way in which Republicans (both those on Koch's gravy train and those not) will use this to try to privatize TSA. (Though it is equally important to call attention to Michael Chertoff and Linda Daschle's interests in pushing the backscatters, which Ames and Levine seem to have no interest in doing, perhaps because it would show there's corrupt money on both sides of this issue.) It is legitimate to discredit false stories like McLain's—though the press has already largely done that. It is legitimate to treat complaints about the TSA procedures with the same skepticism you treat any self-reporting.

But what Ames and Levine have done here is 1) insinuate things about John Tyner they're now backing off of 2) show that the discredited Meg McLain has ties to Koch and that another of the activists opposed to gate grope works for a goddamned dental PAC (apparently, the dentists have a nefarious interest in opposing gate grope), and 3) show that John Mica—who may or may not have ties to any of the other people Ames and Levine make insinuations about—has done what Republicans (and frankly, most politicians) do: capitalized on an opportunity to help his campaign donors.

At its base level, they're suggesting correlation implies causation. But their evidence of correlation is really weak; and by their own admission, they don't even manage to tie the two critical parts of their argument—McLain to Mica—together, except through

really attenuated Koch links. And through timing. Which, as I've suggested, would be most easily explained by the timing of changes in the TSA procedure.

Now it may well be that those mobilizing on this are all motivated by payments from the Koch brothers; though they haven't made that argument (funny! I'm now left wondering where my payments from both Soros and Koch are!). It certainly is true that fans of privatization (and profiling) will use the outrage at gate grope to push their pet projects—and those of us who believe privatization would make problems of airport security worse need to make that point more clearly.

At base, Ames and Levine's article—the entire thing, not just their insinuations about Tyner—is just a poorly defended argument. They may well have a point; they may well someday prove this was all a scam designed to benefit John Mica's donors. But at this point, what we have is an editorial failure: a bunch of loose connections built on top of insinuations about someone they now concede is probably innocent and relying on assumptions that have not been proven and really faulty logic. Sure, the question Ames and Levine ask might be worth asking—in a tweet or a personal blog post. But until they actually *answer* their own question, it's probably not worth an article in the Nation.