

Porch

Letter from the editor

Lounge

Learn It From Lexy

The Reckless Tongue

Rant

2400 Baud

The Cultured Savage

Words Gone Wild

Selections

Gallery

Photography 101

Global Image Cafe

Expressions

2400 Baud

by [John Gorenfeld](#)

His Own Private Abu Ghraib

Wednesday, March 23, 2005

He created a system to reprogram bad kids. Delete the bad code in their personalities. Break the will of sullen stoner boys, make bad girls confess to whorish secrets and reverse-engineer the minds of heavy metal kids. And rebuild all of them into an anti-drug army. Such were the works of Melvin Sembler and the feats that STRAIGHT, the ultimate in teen drug rehab programs, attempted during the Totally Awesome Eighties.

Melvin Sembler's clinics might have seemed like a good idea at the time, when teen drug use was high and New Age thinking seemed to offer new and hopeful therapies for pressing the RESET button on human beings.

There were major problems, though. He modeled STRAIGHT after another program, creepily named "The Seed," shut down after the U.S. Congress literally issued a report in 1974 comparing it to "the highly refined 'brainwashing' techniques employed by the North Koreans." Sembler's imitation wasn't shut down until 1993 for illegal child abuse: beatings and sexual humiliation. Kids were thrown against walls. Or forced to sit in their own menstrual blood. Unless, of course, they were ready to cooperate, confess, and chant "I'm at STRAIGHT, feeling great" with the others. In that case they got to be the enforcers. [Dozens of lawsuits](#) exposed a similar picture in 12 clinics across America.

Fast forward to 2005. Sembler, 75, is the United States Ambassador to Italy. The enforcers have turned into Sembler's enemies and one man is out for payback.

On a balmy recent Florida day I drove around St. Petersburg with former STRAIGHT teen Richard Bradbury, 39. The bleach-haired vigilante was dressed in shiny white baller gear and earrings, and calm for now under the spell of Xanax. He's been living on a disability check and even had to sell his beloved boat. He landed himself in a whole heap of lawsuit in 2003 by trying to humiliate the ambassador.

Bradbury knows his actions are not to be taken lightly. He is meddling with a man so powerful that Gov. Jeb Bush once named a "Betty Sembler Day" in Florida to honor his wife's ongoing, taxpayer-funded campaigns on behalf of workplace urine tests. And he has raised so much money for Republicans that men named George Bush make him an ambassador every time they become president. The Florida drug crusader and businessman was also the boss of the Bush campaign war chest in 2000, and now - improbably - the U.S. representative to Italy, where he has been in the news this month over the Iraq mess.

"He's way at the top of the world," Bradbury said as he

 [printer friendly](#)

Related Articles

- [Just Say No](#)
- [A State of Apathy](#)
- [The Wrong Kind of Privacy](#)
- [One Tiny Tear](#)
- [The New Mythology](#)
- [The Economics of Subversive Racism](#)
- [Up with Pessimism](#)
- [The Porn Wars](#)
- [Sweet Serendipity](#)
- [Scary Future Dystopias, Reviewed](#)
- [A Dirty Mouth Worth Listening To](#)
- [The President?s Last Bang](#)

cruised to dance music he described as "bumpin'," over the Tampa Bay causeway and then past the shopping centers built by Sembler Co, the local firm that made Sembler rich. "I'm at the bottom of it. He's got a long way to fall, but where else am I gonna go?"

Bradbury began harassing Sembler after leaving the program in the mid-1980s and deciding that what happened to him was illegal. He helped bring down STRAIGHT in Florida by playing whistleblower, turning over documents that triggered an investigation and exposed a politically-motivated cover-up. As a result, the warehouse-like building near Burger King in St. Pete is no longer a teen hell, but a cable company. For years parents would trick their kids into entering that place. A typical ploy: *"Yeah, we're still goin' to Disney World, let's just duck into this unmarked building for a second. . ."*

Says Bradbury of what happened inside: "You don't understand what they did to these kids. . . . They put stuff up my butt."

That part is over now. And yet Bradbury fights on. But when will Bradbury or other Sembler-bashers - like [Wes Fager](#), a programmer who says his son suffered a mental collapse after attending a Virginia STRAIGHT - drop their grudges over lifelong psychological problems and so forth?

No time soon, perhaps. For the past two years, Bradbury has dug through Sembler's trash outside his St. Petersburg home. Set off by the story of an ongoing Death Row case involving a STRAIGHT teen who murdered a gay man after being spat on as a "faggot" in the program, Bradbury lashed out. He used eBay to post something he'd found on Sembler's sidewalk: [a penis pump](#).

When a lawyer demanded he give it back, he demanded \$700,000 instead. Bradbury, accused of stalking and intentional infliction of emotional damage, is still in court. He's hoping the ambassador will be forced to testify about STRAIGHT and be held accountable, though how likely that is remains unclear.

Why the ambassador has such determined enemies may have something to do with his high-rolling lifestyle in the face of past trauma. The Semblers live in a palace-like walled estate in Rome, featuring the city's largest private garden. They jokingly call it "The Magic Kingdom" - like Disney World, the real one as opposed to the unmarked building near Burger King. The wealth that brought him here stems from his accomplishments as shopping center developer in St. Petersburg. He was also Bush I's Ambassador to Australia. And he is founder of St. Pete's Holocaust museum.

Then there is his public cheerfulness about STRAIGHT. His Web site brags of saving 12,000 kids from drugs. George H.W. Bush awarded it one of the "thousand points of light" awards.

His influence, according to a 1993 audit by the State of Florida, kept STRAIGHT open despite the facts. Phone calls from politicians in 1989 warned health inspectors

that it didn't matter what abuse they reported, the clinics would stay open. After all, they were run by a personal friend of the President. "A persistent foul odor," the *St. Petersburg Times* editorialized.

Then there is the survival of STRAIGHT's ideas. By 1994 the clinics were closed in name, but offshoots continue today - with names like SAFE of Orlando.

With a legacy like this, it's almost enough to make you wonder if potential ambassadors are not chosen for their awesome diplomatic skills but their generosity in giving money to political parties. Italians have taken notice; Sembler earned attention this month during a diplomatic crisis over a March 4 incident when trigger-happy American GIs shot an Italian journalist and killed her rescuer. The Christian news site Reta Della Pace has just published [an article](#) on Sembler's past, quoting STRAIGHT parent Fager as saying that 40 STRAIGHT graduates [killed themselves](#).

It's no wonder Italians are bewildered. Prison abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have Europeans wondering if their once-admired ally, the U.S., is O.K. in the head. And now we're leaving the impression that it's O.K. - heroic, even - to treat young Americans like Guantanamo Bay inmates.

Meanwhile, the children of the Eighties continue to [disagree with](#) Sembler's claim that he saved thousands from drugs.

"It's never left my head even after 17 years!!!" posts 1988 graduate Becky Wright, one unsatisfied Straight client. Also typical is Kelly Caputo's post: "I was abused on a daily basis, and have silently suffered for years as a result. I don't think I will ever be the same. My every thought has been violated, confused, degraded, and warped. . . . When my book comes out, God knows when, and I become famous, LOL, Sembler will be sorry."

The same day as the Iraq killing, the Washington Post awarded Sembler the "Narcissism Run Amok" award. He'd made history by convincing a friend of his in Congress to quietly insert a line into an appropriations bill, renaming an \$83 million building 'The Mel Sembler Building.'

"We don't do that, do we?" George W. Bush reportedly told the congressman. "We don't name buildings for ambassadors where they have served."

"Mr. President," the Post quoted the congressman as saying, "I introduced the bill and you signed it."

Zany fun. It was a first - even Ben Franklin never arranged for something like this, and he was full of himself.

Unimpressed by the Mel Sembler Building, a tribute to a man who doesn't speak Italian, the Italians decided several days later to leave Iraq.

Why should you care about the STRAIGHT story? Because

there's been a national debate over whether torture is worth it if it gets terrorists to reveal their secrets. Some worry we've opened Pandora's Box, inviting torture and ends-define-the-means abuse into the rest of the American way of life. But it's old news. Turns out that in some states we've been using it on teenagers for years.

(The ambassador has declined an interview request, has said he won't answer questions about STRAIGHT, and his attorney did not return my e-mail.)

Thoughts? Send a Letter to the Editor to letters@orkut.com

in affiliation with Google



[about media](#) | [media FAQ](#) | [RSS](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Terms](#)