

General McAuliffe and Avishai Cohen

by Hugh Fitzgerald



General Anthony McAuliffe

If you are an American of a certain age, you no doubt have heard the story of Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, and his famous reply to the German general who had demanded the surrender of McAuliffe's 101st Airborne to the German troops who had the Americans bottled up, and surrounded, in the Belgian town of Bastogne.

Here is that story:

Brigadier General McAuliffe was the commander of the division artillery of the 101st Airborne Division. He parachuted into Normandy on D-Day and landed by glider in the Netherlands during Operation Market Garden. He became deputy division commander of the 101st Airborne, following the death of Brigadier General Don Pratt on June 6, 1944.

In December 1944, the Battle of the Bulge began when the German army launched a surprise attack. Since Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, was at a staff conference in the U.S., McAuliffe commanded the 101st and the troops who were attached to it. That force was besieged at Bastogne by a German force that was far larger, under the command of General Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz.

On December 22, 1944, von Lüttwitz sent an ultimatum to McAuliffe, via a major, a lieutenant, and two enlisted men who went out under a flag of truce. They entered the American lines near Bastogne and delivered the following note to Gen. McAuliffe:

To the U.S.A. Commander of the encircled town of Bastogne.

The fortune of war is changing. This time the U.S.A. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units. More German armored units have crossed the river Our near Ortheuville, have taken Marche and reached St. Hubert by passing through Hompre-Sibret-Tillet. Libramont is in German hands.

There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town. In order to think it over a term of two hours will be granted beginning with the presentation of this note.

If this proposal should be rejected one German Artillery Corps and six heavy A. A. Battalions are ready to annihilate the U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing

will be given immediately after this two hours term.

All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity.

McAuliffe and his staff received this message when they were gathered in Bastogne's Heintz Barracks for Christmas dinner on December 25, 1944. After McAuliffe read the note, he crumpled it into a ball, threw it in the garbage, and said, "Aw, nuts." The officers in McAuliffe's command post were trying to frame an official reply when Lt. Col. Harry Kinnard stated that McAuliffe's first response was a good enough answer in itself. The others agreed. The official reply was typed and delivered to the German delegation. It said:

To the German Commander.

NUTS!

The American Commander.

The German major was confused and asked Colonel Joseph Harper, who had delivered the message, what it meant. Harper said: "In plain English? Go to hell." The 101st held off the Germans until the following day, when the 4th Armored Division arrived to provide reinforcement.

I think of a Hollywood version – circa 1952 – of this episode. General McAuliffe would be played by Jimmy Stewart, Colonel Harry Kinnard by Henry Fonda, Colonel Joseph Harper by Jack Lemmon, and Captain Vincent Vicari by Tony Curtis.

As for the German commander, General Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz, he should be played by Conrad Veidt (Colonel Strasser in *Casablanca*), and the German major by Anton Diffring.

Others have been delivering their own version of "Nuts" to

representatives of the relentlessly anti-Israel BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement. Scarlett Johansson did so by deed rather than word. She had been a public ambassador for Oxfam. But when that organization declared that Johansson's being a spokesperson for the Israeli company Sodastream, which at the time had a plant on the West Bank, was "incompatible" with her work as an ambassador for Oxfam – fully expecting her to quit her job with Sodastream – Johansson instead promptly quit her job with Oxfam. It was Scarlett Johansson's version of McAuliffe's "Nuts." And she has continued to attack BDS ever since.

Which brings the tale round to another case of "Nuts." The celebrated Israeli jazz trumpeter, Avishai Cohen, who now lives and works in New York, was recently asked by representatives of BDS for his support. The story is [here](#).

*Acclaimed Israeli jazz player Avishai Cohen had a short and sweet response when asked to boycott Israel: "Go f*** yourself."*

Cohen told Israeli news website Walla on Sunday that he was approached by representatives of the BDS movement due to a song on his 2017 album Cross My Palm With Silver about Israel's presence in the West Bank. They asked him not to play a concert in Israel.

"I never paid attention to them," Cohen said. "And when they came to me, I told them 'Go f yourself.'"***

"It's not your business to tell me where to play and where not to play," he said he told them.

Cohen, who was born in Tel Aviv, has recorded 10 albums as a bandleader and collaborated with some of the biggest names in jazz. He has been voted Rising Star-Trumpet by the famed jazz magazine Down Beat for four years in a row.

Avishai Cohen was a bit wordier in his reply to BDS than General McAuliffe had been in his answer to the German general who demanded his surrender. Still, Avishai Cohen struck just the right dismissive note. I think the ghost of General McAuliffe would be proud.

And before leaving the subject of trumpeters and Jews, let's remember the story of Louis Armstrong and the Karnoffsky family. Here it is:

The Karnoffskys took him in and treated him like family. Knowing he lived without a father, they fed and nurtured him. In his memoir Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, La., the Year of 1907, he described his discovery that this family was also subject to discrimination by "other white folks" who felt that they were better than Jews: "I was only seven years old but I could easily see the ungodly treatment that the white folks were handing the poor Jewish family whom I worked for." He wore a Star of David pendant for the rest of his life and wrote about what he learned from them: "how to live—real life and determination." His first musical performance may have been at the side of the Karnoffsky's junk wagon. To distinguish them from other hawkers, he tried playing a tin horn to attract customers. Morris Karnoffsky gave Armstrong an advance toward the purchase of a cornet from a pawn shop.

If Armstrong were alive today, and asked to support BDS, I think I know how he'd answer. Something short and sweet, something between "Nuts" and "Go F*** Yourself."

First published in