

Free Speech, Irresponsible Speech, and the Climate of Intolerance in 2009

Shortly after anti-government terrorist Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City in April 1995, President Bill Clinton urged Americans to challenge those who use powerful political and media platforms to promote the kind of inflammatory falsehoods that poison public discourse, make civil conversation impossible, and can ultimately lead to violence. The reaction from right-wing leaders of the day was sadly predictable and by now familiar: they claimed that Clinton was seeking to “silence” voices of dissent, even though his speech affirmed that the First Amendment protects both the purveyors of irresponsible speech and those who challenge him.

Today a similar dynamic is stoked by an even more powerful right-wing media machine and networks of online activists. And far too often, high-ranking elected officials join pundits and other extremists in promoting wildly false and inflammatory charges designed to convince Americans that President Obama and his allies are dangerous enemies of American values who are bent on destroying religious liberty and stripping Americans of their guns and their freedom of speech.

People For the American Way’s analysis from fourteen years ago is worth reconsidering today in the wake of recent acts of domestic terrorism and the flowering of ever-more inflammatory rhetoric. Here’s a short excerpt:

Language that attributes heinous motives and goals to individuals and organizations — such as accusations that liberals are out to destroy Christianity or that advocates for civil rights for gays and lesbians want to molest young children — destroys any recognition of common interest and any hope of finding common ground among political opponents. That is a terribly dangerous situation in a democratic society.

It is tempting to reassure ourselves by saying that hate speech is the denizen of only the furthest

fringes of American political life. Unfortunately, that assertion is clearly not true. Elected officials and highly visible political leaders are among those who spread messages of fear and suspicion, over and over, day in and day out. The repetition of such messages cannot contribute to the well-being of our communities or the health of our society at large. Regardless of whether such messages “cause” violent behavior, they clearly serve to legitimize those who do violate the law.

Sound familiar? In the wake of the assassination of Dr. George Tiller by an anti-abortion zealot and the killing of a guard at the Holocaust Museum by a white supremacist who feared that the government was getting ready to take away his guns, right-wing pundits have reacted with anger against any suggestion that they devote some self-reflection to rhetoric that may have inspired the killings. The same was true last year when a gunman opened fire in a Unitarian Universalist church in Tennessee, his stated hatred for liberals fueled by the invective that enriches pundits like Michael Savage, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly, whose books were found in his home.

Of course, even irresponsible pundits cannot be held directly responsible for the actions of followers who turn to violence, but there is little question that the hatred they foment day after day creates a climate in which such violence is more likely and less surprising. We call on public officials to resist the temptation to gain admiration and support from far-right activists by embracing and repeating the most outrageous and incendiary speech.

Anyone who believes we are overstating the case is not paying attention. Examples of the excesses of inflammatory and demonstrably false far-right rhetoric can be found every day by reading the paper, following daily analysis at www.RightWingWatch.org, reviewing this series of “Right Wing Watch In Focus” reports, consulting www.MediaMatters.org, or checking a recent synopsis from Salon.

President Obama as Public Enemy Number One

Certainly, anyone who runs for national office enters a high-stakes rough-and-tumble arena in which they can expect fierce criticism from political opponents. That's been true throughout American history. But even by those standards, the kind of charges made by far-right activists and repeated by conservative pundits with huge audiences as well as party officials and Members of Congress are stunning. Janet Porter, a Religious Right pundit and author of *The Criminalization of Christianity*, recently called Obama "dictator in chief" and insisted, "This dictatorship must be stopped. And it must be stopped now." Actor John Voigt recently urged right-wing activists to stay the course and "bring an end to this false prophet Obama." Former Southern Baptist Convention official Wiley Drake openly prays for Obama's death.

President Obama as Usurper

President Obama and his non-traditional family background are the targets of ongoing smear campaigns that accuse him, among other things, of not being an American but a covert Muslim seeking to destroy American ideals. An ongoing "birther" campaign led by far-right "news" service WorldNetDaily continues to push the claim that Obama is not an American citizen and is wrongly holding the presidency. WND is now placing billboards asking "Where's the Birth Certificate." Rush Limbaugh recently joined those falsely claiming that Obama does not have a birth certificate.

President Obama as Anti-American

Sen. James Inhofe recently called President Obama's speech in the Middle East "un-American" and flatly asserted "I just don't know whose side he's on." As journalist Steve Benen has noted, Inhofe has previously accused Obama of "disarming America" and intending to let "hard-core terrorists" run "loose in the United States." During last year's presidential campaign, Inhofe questioned whether Obama loves America.

President Obama and Liberals as Enemies of free speech and religious liberty

Religious Right leaders routinely smear President Obama, Democratic Party officials, and gay-rights activists as enemies of free speech and religious freedom, and portray progress on marriage equality, hate crimes bills, and anti-discrimination legislation as steps toward criminalizing Christianity. Typical is the claim of Rep. Louis Gohmert, who told right-wing activist and radio host Janet Porter that hate crimes legislation would so restrict free speech

that her introduction of him, as well as her claims that the law would protect pedophiles at the expense of Christians, would be illegal: "You can't talk like that once this becomes law," he said.

Pat Boone recently wrote a column, "Christians, here come the lions," in which he warned, "The end of our religious freedom in America could be at hand." He continued:

Our new president, his administration, a Congress and much of the judiciary ruled by ultra-liberal, "progressive" and humanistic men and women, egged on and abetted by the ACLU, are actively making plans and devising bills that will force Christians to either obey the new laws, or be fined, jailed – or who knows? Perhaps physically punished, imprisoned, or worse.

Falsely claiming that liberal activists and political leaders are trying to make public expressions of faith illegal, or are preparing to round up Christians and throw them in jail is a recipe for angry and divided communities. But it's a standard technique of the Religious Right, even when the claims have little relation to the truth.

Right-wing leaders falsely claimed that President Obama was out to silence right-wing radio even after Obama had stated explicitly that he was opposed to any effort to re-introduce the "Fairness Doctrine." And Religious Right leaders continue to insist that federal hate crimes legislation is designed to silence pastors and other critics of homosexuality, even though the legislation includes explicit affirmations of First Amendment protections for speech and religious liberty.

Earlier this year, Religious Right activists and Republicans in the Senate waged a publicity campaign that massively distorted a routine provision in the stimulus bill that prevented public funds being directed toward colleges and universities from being used to build or renovate houses of worship. Led by the ACLJ's Jay Sekulow, Religious Right leaders and their media allies accused Democrats of waging a "war on prayer." Sen. Jim DeMint told CBN's David Brody that "Democrats are looking for every opportunity to purge faith and prayer from the public square."

Also earlier this year, Focus on the Family ran a video on its website claiming that President Obama was trying to "silence" Rush Limbaugh and suggesting a parallel to oppression under the Nazi regime. It includes a young woman paraphrasing the famous "First they came for..." remarks attributed to Martin Niemoller and concludes, "When they came for me, well, actually, they didn't come

for me, because by then, I was living in a socialist country, where my preacher's sermons are approved by the U.S. Department of Orthodoxy."

President Obama as Socialist or Fascist

Former and likely future presidential candidate Mike Huckabee is among many right-wing activists who call Obama a socialist. Huckabee warned earlier this year that the U.S. was becoming the Union of American Socialist Republics, and said about Obama's budget, "Lenin and Stalin would love this stuff." Sen. James DeMint told attendees at the Conservative Political Action Conference that Americans might have to take to the streets to stop America's slide into socialism. Others have decided that there's more mileage in calling Obama a fascist, including pundit Jonah Goldberg, author of "Liberal Fascism," and right-wing entertainer Glenn Beck, who said, with Nazis marching behind him, "People are once again feeling oppressed by an out of control state.... Like it or not, fascism is on the rise."

Taking Away Americans' Guns

When James Von Brunn, a racist and anti-Semite, shot and killed a guard at the U.S. Holocaust museum, a note left in his car read, "You want my weapons — this is how you'll get them." The Holocaust museum killer, like the murderer of three policemen in Pittsburgh in April, was afraid that the Obama administration was going to take away his guns. He could have heard that from plenty of places, including the National Rifle Association and other gun groups, pundits like Fox News' Glenn Beck and CNN's Lou Dobbs, and Sen. Tom Coburn, who has accused the Obama administration of supporting policies aimed at "disarming us." "Remember," warned *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, "the first step in establishing a dictatorship is to disarm the citizens." Ken Blackwell of the Family Research Council called President Obama's nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court "a declaration of war against America's gun owners and the Second Amendment to our Constitution."

Department of Homeland Security Report

Right Wing Watch has extensively documented the Right's campaign of falsehoods against the Department of Homeland Security's report on the potential for right-wing domestic terrorism. The campaign of distortions led to the report being withdrawn by DHS chief Janet Napolitano, though recent tragic events have made it seem prescient. Right-wing leaders decided to get political mileage out of portraying the report as one more attack on conservatives, free speech, and on Christianity. Janice

Crouse of Concerned Women for America told the American Family Association's OneNewsNow that the report is a direct attack on the church. "[It's] a direct assault on the basic principles of religious beliefs that have been here since the time of Christ," she argues. "These are the things that Christ died on the cross for."

Gays as pedophiles

One appalling development has been the return to public discourse of public officials openly equating gay rights with support for pedophilia, a false and hugely inflammatory charge that seemed to have faded somewhat as equality for gay people gained support among the American public. But in their desperation to defeat hate crimes legislation, members of Members of Congress joined James Dobson and other insisting that Democrats were giving rights to pedophiles at the expense of Christians. One WorldNetDaily story used the phrase "Pedophile Protection Act" no fewer than four times in referring to federal hate crimes legislation under consideration, once quoting Rep. Louis Gohmert of Texas using the term.

Abortion

Religious Right leader James Dobson dismissed President Obama's speech at Notre Dame, saying "But you can't compromise with evil. I mean, in what way are you going to compromise with the killing of babies?" His guest, former Bush administration official Tim Goeglein, responded, "There is no compromise. There can be no compromise on the question of the defense of the innocent pre-born."

After the killing of Dr. George Tiller, some reporters examined the rhetoric that had been used by his critics, including pundit Bill O'Reilly who had repeatedly called him a baby killer and mass murderer and who had urged people to besiege Tiller's clinic. O'Reilly was furious when challenged on whether his rhetoric or actions may have helped to incite Tiller's murderer. Some anti-abortion activists dutifully criticized the killing, but then seemed to offer justification. Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry said that Tiller had "reaped what he sowed." Colorado Right to Life's Bob Enyart told the *Los Angeles Times* that abortion providers should expect violence. "If a Mafia hit man gets killed, people recognize it's an occupational hazard," he said.

Right-Wing as a "Resistance Movement"

People For the American Way Foundation reported earlier this year on the Right re-tooling itself into a "resistance movement."

That effort began as soon as the votes were counted last November. “I knew, moments after the election results came in, that I was now part of the resistance movement,” says Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America. CWA is mobilizing religious conservatives with the claim that “We face a president and Congress more hostile to unborn children, to marriage, to religious freedom, to free speech, to protecting our country than has ever existed in our history.” Right-wing Catholic leader Deacon Keith Fournier similarly pledged to be part of a “massive resistance.”

Author Orson Scott Card, who recently joined the board of the National Organization for Marriage, wrote last year that supporters of “traditional” marriage would consider the U.S. government and the U.S. Constitution their enemy if gay Americans were permitted to legally marry:

How long before married people answer the dictators thus: Regardless of law, marriage has only one definition, and any government that attempts to change it is my mortal enemy. I will act to destroy that government and bring it down, so it can be replaced with a government that will respect and support marriage, and help me raise my children in a society where they will expect to marry in their turn. [...] American government cannot fight against marriage and hope to endure. If the Constitution is defined in such a way as to destroy the privileged position of marriage, it is that insane Constitution, not marriage, that will die.

Conclusion: A Call for Responsible Dissent and Engaged Citizenship

Among Americans’ most prized possessions are the freedoms enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution. In a free society, controversial public policy issues should be expected to generate vigorous and even heated debate. Our political leaders should expect to be subject to exacting scrutiny and energetic criticism. And Americans must be willing to embrace the First Amendment rights even, or especially, of those whose opinions we disagree with and find offensive.

But Americans must also be willing to use their First Amendment freedoms to challenge those who exploit their political positions or media megaphones to promote lies that are intended to inflame rather than inform, that encourage paranoia rather than participation, and whose consequences are at best divisive and at worst, violently destructive.