

Exposure beats hatemongering

By Charles Davis

The shrill incivility framing what passes for discourse on health care reform seems to have long ago crossed over into territory unrecognized by most rational citizens of the republic.

In the age of instant cable punditry, e-mail Astroturf campaigns left and right and made-to-order outrage, it's easy to sigh, close the old browser and get back to the business of preseason football, but scratch a bit harder at the random news offered as so many one-off stories about unhinged denizens from the "town hall" meetings (has ever an honored democratic practice been so tarnished?), and a clear trend emerges.

Hate, shuffled off stage in the post-racial haze of the election of the nation's first black president, is back with a vengeance. Hate, if it ever truly threatened to leave the political stage, is most definitely back, larger and nastier than ever.

As a near-absolutist First Amendment advocate, my prescription for hate speech is always more speech: Give the bigot a microphone as big as the hatred, I say, and watch as the marketplace of ideas works its magic.

Perhaps that's why I worry, as I watch an emboldened mob grow more irresponsible with each passing day, that the mainstream media fails to give hate the coverage it deserves today. My proposition is simple: Major news organizations need to cover hate the way they once did—as a standalone beat.

I was reminded of the way the news media once treated old-fashioned hate the other day while reading a PBS discussion of a fabulous book, "The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation." The Race Beat, co-authored by Hank Klibanoff and Gene Roberts, documents the coverage of the civil rights movement in the South and chronicles in chilling detail what we now recall

was a watershed in the treatment of hate as, well, morally repugnant behavior that we as a nation just weren't going to stand for.

Such a stance required a moral determination on the part of the press—that overt racism institutionalized by southern governments was wrong—and coverage of the goon sheriffs, their German Shepherds and their water hoses and their physical thuggery offered the nation a picture of hate in all its awful fury.

Eager to jettison all that residual guilt, journalists and most Americans were ready to embrace the notion of a turning of the racial page, and President Barack Obama's election offered hope that the hate beat was a thing of the past.

All it took to unleash all the demons was a policy debate. A contentious debate, to be sure, but look at what the hate beat had to offer in the past week:

A man holding a sign reading "Death To Obama, Death To Michelle And Her Two Stupid Kids" at a Wednesday town hall in Maryland.

A man bearing a sidearm appears outside President Obama's town hall meeting last Tuesday in Portsmouth, N.H., under a sign proclaiming, "It is time to water the tree of liberty."

As David Frum of the American Enterprise notes in a thoughtful plea for restraint, "that phrase of course references a famous statement of Thomas Jefferson's, from a 1787 letter: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants."

And those are but the latest manifestations of a weeklong campaign by a host of radio and cable TV personalities not merely choosing to ignore the hatred, but actively working to gin up the passion, to pour fuel on what quickly is becoming a blaze.

Glenn Beck tells viewers President Obama has "a deep-seated

hatred of white people," while Sean Hannity openly relishes violence—and declares that if it occurs, the president will have only himself to blame. Beck one-ups Hannity by opining that white males are being driven to murderous rage by "political correctness." Rush Limbaugh, meanwhile, has reached the point where he uses the names "Obama" and "Hitler" at random. All in a single week on the hate beat.

Television news networks, meanwhile, clamor for more. The blog Talking Points Memo uncovered this nugget: CNBC approached Tea Party activists, looking for angry protest events that would make good television, according to a leaked e-mail from a Tea Party discussion group. And one Tea Bagger responded by flagging an upcoming event that, he said, "should be a riot ... literally."

Tea Party Patriots national coordinator Jenny Beth Martin sent an e-mail, obtained by TPM, to a Tea Party Google group. Martin told the group: "We have a media request for an event this week that will have lots of energy and lots of anger. This is for CNBC."

Fox News' Trace Gallagher said the other day that Fox would return to live coverage of the president's health care town hall provided there is "any contentious questions, anybody yelling."

Somewhere, somehow, the news media have to make the same determination those brave civil rights-era reporters and editors made: This is wrong, deeply wrong, and we must cover it, day in, day out, like any other beat, albeit a more distasteful beat than most.

(See Reaction story on page 13.)

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