

BEWARE THE ADVERSARY CULTURE

Do we need a language police? Or is the ugliness of our public dialogue simply part of a deeper sickness, a contemporary culture whose predominant style is in-your-face aggression? The very idea of restraint in speech seems un-American. Freedom of the press, which means freedom of speech, comes first in our Bill of Rights. But all blessings, as John Updike once wrote, are mixed blessings. There are clearly dangers in the flood of confrontation, negation and flat old-fashioned hatred that was given obscene expression in the bombing in Oklahoma City.

The media bear a major responsibility for the disassociation of freedom and responsibility. Decades of second-rate television have habituated Americans to seeing conflict and violence, rather than wit and wisdom, as the solution to all problems. In the 1990s, we have hate radio as the part of talk radio that has become a megaphone for community anger. Fundamental to this trend is the perversion of a culture of rights. Once we had rights against arbitrary power; now society is fractured with one group claiming rights against another, while every group claims to be a victim. It is white hats against black hats, us against them and them against us.

The adversary culture provides a certain spurious drama that the media have been overly tempted to exploit. Too often, the only way to break into the realm of public attention is through controversy; declarations of values or beliefs in the American way are seen as boring or corny. Everything is the subject of ridicule. The media sense that assaulting social norms is good business (Madonna has made an entire career out of this). So we have trash books, trash TV, trash newspapers, trash magazines, trash talk. The public may seem to abhor this out-of-control media, but mainstream America still cannot seem to stop watching or reading the stuff. The consequence is a subversion of the moral authority of everyone, from pope to president.

It may be good for business, but it is bad for America. An adversarial media attacking every person and every movement makes it difficult to build consensus or coherence in any society. America is particularly vulnerable because we have built our politics more on

personalities and less on ideology than have others. In the present environment, no hero or leader can emerge. Every mistake a public figure makes, every idiosyncrasy exposed, is pounced on. Every public figure is assumed to be hiding some dirty secret that it is the media's duty to ferret out, no matter how long ago and no matter how petty.

In such a vindictive culture it is virtually impossible to rally the nation or to bind its wounds. We are living in a time of accelerating social and economic turmoil that strains the connective tissues of many individuals to marriage, family, school, church, nation, job—indeed, to any sense of responsibility.

That is why we have so many troubled individuals prowling the margins of society, their resentments on the verge of exploding into violence when agitated by hate speech.

Even more worrisome than the crazies is the depth of anger and alienation felt by ordinary people for government, our politicians and our bureaucrats. Government is feared as too intrusive, too big, too powerful and too imperious. One *USA Today*-CNN poll found that 39 percent think that the federal government has become so large that it poses an "immediate" threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens.

When the word "immediate" was dropped from the question, the number grew to 52 percent. Irritation with bureaucrats and excessive taxes is widespread—and understandable—and merits our concern, but blanket denunciations of government are pointless and counterproductive. Government will have to play a role in evolving new ways of coping with the vast changes we face; and it can only do it while we recognize that democracy depends on talk and compromise, goals and values. We are the only nation founded on the notion that all men are equal in their claim to justice and that the government exists to enable all who can to realize their fullest promise.

In these fraught times, our rhetoric must be toned down, our words more carefully weighed, even while we expose and correct the evils of the day. We cannot allow divisiveness and anger to replace *e pluribus unum* as America's national theme. ■

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