

“HUMILITY” MAKES A COMEBACK (FOR A WHILE)

By TONYA MORTON

In the wake of the Tucson shootings, the notion of “humility” seems to be making a comeback. In his Tucson memorial speech, President Obama called for greater civility and humility in public discussions. Articles on the election of the new chair of the Republican National Committee all stress that he was chosen, in large part, for his public attitude of self-deprecation and his reluctance to stand in the limelight. In the past couple weeks, Democrats and Republicans from both legislative bodies have filled the seats of Sunday morning talk shows and political round tables, all full-to-bursting with praise for bipartisan civility. It was as if a new sun were rising in Washington, and all the politicians, basking in the glow, had to grudgingly admit, “You know, when I said the president was an unapologetic Stalinist and nefarious illegal alien who wanted to slaughter the rich and feed their decomposing bodies to the poor of the Third World... well, I may have been exaggerating.”

It isn't that our language is fundamentally wrong. The problem with America is that our ideas are wrong.

It is wrong for political leaders on the Right to espouse the idea that liberals are amoral elitists who want to destroy children and families and churches.

And it is wrong for political leaders on the Left to characterize their conservative opponents as power-hungry halfwits.

The problem, as President Obama rightly said, is a lack of humility—the inability among political voices to say, “Here's what I believe, but, you know, I could be wrong.” Why, for instance, is it impossible for commentators on



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In the wake of the discovery that *gasp* much of the political language used in the last election was rather decidedly uncivil, news commentators and political pundits stumbled through their sentences, clumsily searching for safer, kinder idioms to replace, “taking a shot at the opposition,” or “killing jobs.” Anchors on the major cable news networks smiled awkwardly through their hairstyles as they continually stopped mid-sentence, apologized, and tried, tried again to sound like goodhearted, nonviolent people. Mostly, everyone on television the past couple weeks looked like an idiot.

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Everyone, that is, except for the President. Now, normally, I'm not a big fan of Obama, as he's spent the bulk of his tenure so far trying to put a “progressive” face on the same old Bush-era policies. But the reason why Obama's speech in Tucson sailed easily over the heads of the Cable News commentators is because it wasn't about a new humility in word choice; it was about a more humble and civil discourse, which has less to do with wording and more to do with ideas.

So of course all the talking heads sounded silly, trying to put kinder, softer words on the same aggressive, take-no-prisoners, shoot-from-the-hip ideas they've been spouting for years. The “Repeal of the Job-Destroying Health Care Law Act” sounds just as stupid as the “Repeal of the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act,” because it is just as stupid. It's the SAME LAW, informed by the same spirit of aggressive partisanship. The title could just as easily be, “Repeal of the Hitler-Stalin-Death Camp Health Care Law Act,” or the “Repeal of the Sunshine and Daisies Health Care Law Act.”

Fox News to admit that President Obama's Tucson speech was a resounding success? Instead of acting like grown-ups and applauding the eloquence and integrity of Obama's words, they took petty shots at the seating arrangement of the memorial service and the students in the audience, (who apparently weren't mournful enough.) Strangely, it was Glenn Beck, usually the most unhinged of the Fox group, who stepped up to applaud the power of the speech.

And why, on the other side, is it impossible for Democrats to admit that the Obama Health Care bill, despite its merits on expanding coverage, doesn't do enough to lower costs? It's simple enough to admit—certainly no act of government is ever perfect.

The trouble with the political factions isn't the words they use; it's the profound arrogance, on all sides, which leads each group to believe it is the sole standard-bearer of truth and justice and goodness, while the opposing group is the lightning rod of depravity and inhumanity. It's the profound arrogance that claims there is no middle ground on issues like gun control, health care, drug

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policy, or even—heaven forbid—abortion. And it's the profound arrogance that refuses to ever, in a million years, admit that perhaps, on some teeny-weeny issue like, say, Climate Change, or the wisdom of NAFTA, they may have, possibly, perhaps, been wrong.

Historically, politicians have almost always played to the worse motives in human behavior—fear, cutthroat ambition, revenge. Our better angels, compassion and tolerance, reside with our families, in our neighborhoods and churches, but won't dirty their wings by entering the political sphere. We need to bring to politics those same virtues that guide our families: our patience, our

willingness to listen and to sacrifice, and our desire to see each person succeed. Only from that humble foundation can our society hope to produce any ideas worth enacting into law.

Of course, civility isn't nearly as entertaining to watch on television as partisan bickering is. There's a reason why Fox, CNN and MSNBC always stomp Public Broadcasting in ratings. As a country, we take a sick pleasure in watching politicians behaving badly. The lying and the fear-mongering, even when we recognize them as such, are just more fun than an honest appraisal of facts. And it is that troublesome entertainment factor, more than anything, which assures that 2011 is unlikely to be remembered as the year in which humility took Washington by storm. This is still a free country, and, let's be honest, most of us won't be tuning in to CSPAN for a debate on health care reform. Not when we can choose instead to watch two hairstyles debate the merits of the word "Destroy" as apposed to the word "Kill."



TONYA MORTON is a regular contributor to The Zephyr.

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