

A Dialog on Glenn Beck

I do not like Glenn Beck, but I am sometimes as critical of the material on MSNBC. One of the problems we all face is finding reliable sources of information. Perhaps the best we can do - even though it doesn't satisfy either the left or the right, is NPR, PBS and the BBC material which one can get on line, if the broadcasts aren't carried on your local TV.

Second, I am bitterly opposed to those on the left who seek to prevent conservatives from speaking. It is one thing to engage in the grand old American tradition of heckling - when I ran for office I often faced hecklers. You expect speakers to know how to handle these with good humor. What is different now, and what I've found very disturbing, is the efforts to close down free discussion at the various town meetings taking up health issues.

Third, in my decades of political work I've seen many demonstrations, and have been arrested more than a dozen times for taking part in these protests. But never have I seen these demonstrations "organized" by a network (such as Fox). The media reported on the Vietnam and Iraq protests - but they didn't urge people to attend them. There were no commentators on any channel that urged people to turn up for these actions. This is very different from what we see now, where Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and Fox News, serve as sounding boards and organizers for the "tea parties" and for the demonstrations at Congressional hearings.

I have always urged those on "my side" of the political line to meet with members of Congress - as indeed, I've organized and taken part in meetings with the US Ambassadors to the United Nations, serious and dignified efforts at dialogue. But the idea of disrupting these meetings is alien to me, and to the left in general. I find it deeply worrying.

You mention Rashid Khalidi and while I can't comment on every aspect of what you say, many people within the Jewish community in this country are sharply critical of actions of the Israeli government. You refer to the PLO and need to understand that the PLO is a broad organization drawing in almost a full range of Palestinian views, both moderate and radical. (In this sense not so different from the international Zionist organization, which includes both critics of Israeli policy, such as Meretz, and strong supporters of the Israeli government). The late, deeply respected Prof. Edward Said was a member of the PLO, which was something close to a "parliament" of the Palestinians, both in Palestine and abroad.

I have listened to Rev. Jeremiah Wright and while his views are not mine, I do understand his anger and his fury at what Black America has gone through. I disagree with some of what he has said, but I agree with much of it. Let's turn to Bill Ayers. The Weather Underground, of which Ayers was a member, was a sad fragment of the movement against the Vietnam War. I strongly and publicly opposed the Weather Underground. I do know - as I'm sure you do as well - how strongly held beliefs can lead people to violent actions, as is the case with the anti-abortion movement, which recently led to the murder of a doctor - in his church! Surely it would be wrong of me to say that all those who oppose abortion are terrorists and murderers because of the actions of this one man. Ayers' statement that "we should have done more" did not refer to the Weather Underground bombings, but to the general opposition to the Vietnam War - a war which cost the lives of 58,000 Americans, and *three million Vietnamese*.

Ayers engaged in acts of violence but no one was killed in any of those actions, except, very sadly, the 11th Street bombing here in New York City (across the street from a town house ironically owned by Quaker friends of mine!) in which the house was totally destroyed and several of those in the Weather Underground died.

The truth is never entirely on one side. I know, also, that all sides have extreme elements. What I find very discouraging is that in this situation the leadership of the Republican Party has been very slow to call the disrupters to account. I have been horrified - genuinely horrified - at the string of paranoid attacks which come from both the left and the right.

Under Bush there was the whole "9.11 truth movement" which accused Bush of organizing the bombing of the World Trade Center (which is just a mile from where I live). That was a left wing conspiracy movement. There were even those on the left who assured us that Obama would never be elected because the Republicans wouldn't allow a fair count of the votes - or might declare martial law and prevent the election. Such rumors were dangerously wrong. Now we see a string of them from the right - the whole set of charges that Obama is a Muslim, the "birthers" movement, and now the well-organized assault on these public hearings.

I've already stated that I'm a socialist - and if we had socialized medicine I'd be happy. But we don't, that isn't on the table. What is happening is that the massively prosperous HMO's and drug industry are afraid (with good reason!) that any fair plan would cut their profits. And they are the organizers, behind the scenes, of much of the current ruckus. The things Americans take for granted today - social security, Medicare - were opposed by the Republicans. Yet who would now want to remove them?

I believe health care should not be for profit - anymore than our public safety (police and fire) is "for profit". Our society depends on fire and police protection for all, just as we need public education for all. We need health care for all. A great many doctors have now swung over to support for a single-payer system - but the HMO's and the drug companies are fighting this tooth and nail.

There was a time when the Republican Party had men and women of real stature - even if I didn't agree with them. You had Dwight D. Eisenhower as President (a man who was called a Communist by the John Birch Society!). If you are as old as I am, you will remember the late Senator Robert Taft who helped craft a decent public housing bill. And Barry Goldwater, deeply as I opposed him, not only had a sense of humor, but rebuked the more extreme elements in his party before his own death.

What America needs is serious public dialogue, not panic. I've lived through many periods of public panic - the McCarthy period, the insanity of the "civil defense" program (and that was pushed by John F. Kennedy) - and we have survived. Help us to survive now by civil dialogue, by honest concern that we know who is behind the efforts to disrupt the public hearings. By listening to one another, knowing that none of us has the whole truth.

David McReynolds, 8/10/09