



Toxic commentary about toxic commentary

By John Robson
January 14, 2011

The irony in commentary about toxic American political rhetoric after Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot is how toxic the commentary is. If the American right really had a particular penchant for murderous language and ideas it would be important to say it. But it's just not true.

In one sense it doesn't matter because the suspect, Jared Lee Loughner, appears to be insane. But if we are going there, let's go the full distance: He appears to be an atheist Nietzschean enthusiast for the Communist Manifesto whose obsession with language resembles the PC fixation on "privileged discourse." So let's try to stick to the facts.

On Monday's Citizen front page Andrew Cohen wrote "the Tea Party, as agents of a contagion of right-wing extremism in the United States, have helped create a climate of paranoia that has alarmed observers. ... The political discourse has been seriously deteriorating since the presidential campaign of 2008. ... Anxiety and fear are not new in the United States. Richard Hofstadter identified these undercurrents in a provocative essay called 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics.' " Yes. And as a good progressive, Hofstadter pinned it on the right. I'm not sure American political paranoia is a problem compared to, say, the Middle East with its Mossad sharks and vultures. But I do know alarming rhetoric in the U.S. comes mostly from the left.

Remember "Burn, baby, burn" in the 1960s, or Jeremiah Wright, or Susan Sontag calling the white race "the cancer of history" to general applause in the salons? Amerika and The Anarchist Cookbook and radical chic and hijackings to Cuba? The New York Times lionizing Castro in the early 1960s as they had Stalin in the early 1930s? Thomas Jefferson writing in 1793 that rather than see Robespierre's revolution fail "I would have seen half the earth desolated"? Or seventh president and Democratic icon Andrew Jackson saying on his deathbed his only two regrets were "That I didn't shoot Henry Clay and hang John C. Calhoun"?

In Tuesday's Globe and Mail Konrad Yakabuski cited Thomas Frank's What's the Matter with Kansas? to let loose a blast at Arizona, John McCain, "middle-class angst" and immigration reform. But Frank's title originates in a scathing 1896 Emporia Gazette

editorial by William Allen White about Kansas turning itself into a backwater by voting for the clinically paranoid left-wing Populist party.

The Populists' 1892 federal eat-the-rich platform said "a vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism." This bile (about, of all things, gold-backed currency) won them six states.

In 1896 the silver-tongued (and silver-obsessed) William Jennings Bryan won the Populist and Democratic nominations with an electrifying speech to the Democratic National Convention ending "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," surely an unkind portrayal of his adversaries' intentions. He lost but ran for the Democrats again in 1900, accusing the Republicans of holding a "monarchical" principle. William McKinley beat him again, but within a year was assassinated by an anarchist. No monarchist shot Bryan.

If it matters, Loughner was a bimetallist like Bryan. JFK was shot by a guy who'd tried to become a Soviet citizen and his brother Robert by an anti-Israel Palestinian. Reagan was shot by a guy obsessed with a celebrity and a member of the deranged hippie Manson family tried to shoot Gerald Ford.

In Canada, too, politically motivated violence comes mainly from the left: radical separatists, antiglobalizers, aboriginal militants and environmental kooks.

According to MSNBC, Jared Lee Loughner believed the U.S. government was behind the 9-11 attacks. Yes, it's a paranoid, vicious, conspiracy theory ... from the left. Signatories to the October 2004 "911 Truth Statement" included Ralph Nader, Daniel Ellsberg of Pentagon Papers fame, radical historian Howard Zinn, who said he was misled, and Obama adviser Van Jones, who later said he hadn't read it.

Political rhetoric didn't make Jared Lee Loughner go on a murderous rampage. But when a deranged loner shoots a politician and a chorus immediately blames it on their partisan, intellectual or cultural opponents it's not just proof of a toxic strain in North American political discourse. It's an example of it.

John Robson's column appears weekly.

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