

Injury In the Insults

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Not so long ago, Rep. Joe Wilson's verbal assault on the president — "You lie!" — might have produced a much different outcome.

Instead of the U.S. House rebuking Wilson, we might be entertaining the prospect of a duel.

In early America, calling someone a liar wasn't a childish insult but a direct challenge to one's honor, an appropriate response to which varied by region. Where dueling was common — as in Wilson's home state of South Carolina — so were insults.

Here's how an 1882 New York Times article described the thinking of the time as it related to a Mr. John Goode, who had called a certain Mr. Bailey a liar.

Writing that "Nothing but blood can wipe out this insult," the author noted that although the laws of chivalry were supposed to be dominant, "language used in attacking individuals is much more gross and insulting than in regions where the duel is not invoked as the final arbiter betwixt the man who has been insulted and the defamer."

"In the North, we are supposed to be a lily-livered and pusillanimous race. Yet we very much question if any legislator or public man would dare to denounce another as 'a liar.' Nevertheless, in the South, where the code of honor prevails, the exchange of such epithets is possible, and the men who fling these names at each other live and prosper."

Indeed.

Last week, I spoke too soon when I wrote that Wilson might have lost his audience through his boorishness. Projection will get you in trouble every time. Instead, Wilson has become a cult hero, rolling in dough. Both he and his opponent for reelection, Rob Miller, reportedly have raised more than \$1 million each since Wilson's eruption.

Who would have thought that a congressional race in South Carolina could become a referendum on the Obama administration? Two relative unknowns suddenly personify two dueling worldviews: The You-Liars vs. The Truthers. Death-panelists vs. Hoppers-Changers.

As Americans have picked their side of civilization's breach the past few days, some have justified Wilson's words because they think they were true. Sure, one can make a slim case that some of Obama's assertions weren't 100 percent accurate, but Wilson's behavior can't be justified. It isn't done. Period.

And why not? Because civilization is a fragile and delicate idea, held together by a few mere threads, bound together by little more than a wisp of mutual consent. Frays in those threads are daily apparent — from the rude tantrum of Kanye West at the Video Music Awards to the profane threats of tennis star Serena Williams when she disagreed with a line call.

Across the spectrum of society, people are behaving badly. Even those at the very top of their games, who enjoy wealth and status, no longer can be relied upon to carry the standard of exemplary behavior. If ever there were one place we might hope to find people of respectful temperament, it would be where those elected to govern convene to hear the president.

Summation: People in positions of power and privilege have a duty to perform at a higher level. If not them, then who?

To settle the question — did the president speak inaccurately when he said nothing in "our reform effort" would pay for illegal immigrants or abortion? — the answer is, like H.R. 3200, not simple. What's true is that the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service concluded that nothing in H.R. 3200 precludes illegal immigrants from buying public insurance on the proposed Health Insurance Exchange. And, as fact-

checking groups have confirmed, there's wiggle room in the bill whereby public subsidies could be used to purchase insurance that covers abortions.

The Senate Finance Committee is trying to iron out these wrinkles in its version of the bill, but wrinkles they are — hardly cause for Wilson's emotional display. If one were inclined to give the president the benefit of the doubt, he was speaking of reform efforts, not a specific bill. In so doing, he created a political problem for himself because none of the bills thus far comes close to matching his rhetoric.

Meanwhile, there are myriad ways for a congressman to voice objection to the president's ideas or his colleagues' proposals. But dueling has been out of style for quite some time, even in South Carolina. If our will to self-govern is to prevail, then incivility will have to become equally unfashionable.

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An Era of 'Right-Wing Lynch Mobs' and 'Racial Turbulence'?

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Anybody who believes that last month's town-hall meetings marked an unprecedented eruption of anti-democratic thuggery hasn't read much U.S. history. A glance at a gubernatorial debate in Columbus, Georgia, 1906, or at any one of 10,000 other political other political moments from 1796 forward would convince you that this summer's occasions were child's play. Only the gigantic and delicate egos of members of Congress plus the nervousness of journalists who saw ordinary citizens leaping ahead of their coverage raised the town halls to dark and fearsome populist status.

How it plays out now that legislators have returned to D.C. remains to be seen. But the historical ignorance of journalists should continue as an abiding concern of academics, and they should speak out with stern correctives. Two cases occurred last week.

Here is David Sirota on the Van Jones affair, claiming him as a victim of a "right-wing lynch mob."

Now, one ought to rise up at that remark and school Sirota in the reality of lynch mobs. Lynch mobs don't pressure presidents to fire political appointments. They don't rely on media figures to rile them up. They congregate outside a jail, grab someone accused of a crime (often by pointing a pistol at the sheriff's temple), get a witness to identify the accused, then take him out and, depending on the crime, torture him, mutilate him, hang him, riddle him with bullets, and/or burn him. For Sirota to turn a political power surge into a lynching isn't to recognize the racist villainy of elements on the Right. It is to trivialize the suffering of actual lynching victims. Sirota should turn off his overheated imagination and take a look at *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

The other one appeared in *The New York Times*, Maureen Dowd's column on Obama and Southern racism. In the middle of it appears an astonishing paragraph about the figure of the president:

"Now he's at the center of a period of racial turbulence sparked by his ascension. Even if he and the coterie of white male advisers around him don't choose to openly acknowledge it, this president is the ultimate civil-rights figure — a black man whose legitimacy is constantly challenged by a loco fringe."

Racial turbulence? Where? Reading that line, one would think Watts was burning, or that it was the month of April 1968, or that Rodney King's arresters just got off. But none of that is happening except in Dowd's feverish Manhattan eye.

The last phrase is worse. The dash is presented as the start of a definition, as if "a black man whose legitimacy is constantly challenged by a loco fringe" is, indeed, the description of "the ultimate civil-rights figure."

Wrong. When the civil-rights movement began in the late-1940s, leaders didn't oppose fringe groups. They opposed state and local governments and law enforcers, elite and mainstream opinion. They understood that the real enemy was the governor, the sheriff, and the banker, not the Klan and the Birchers. They put their livelihoods and lives on the line, got pummeled and incarcerated.

What to say, except that we have another journalist coming off as a half-wit historian, and academics should call her on it.

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