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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Even Glenn Beck Is Right Twice a Day

By [FRANK RICH](#)

IF only it were just about the color of his skin.

With [all due respect to Jimmy Carter](#), the racist component of Obama-hatred has been undeniable since the summer of 2008, when Sarah Palin rallied all-white mobs to the defense of the “real America.” Joe Wilson may or may not be in that camp, but, either way, that’s not the news. As we watched and rewatched the South Carolina congressman’s star turn, what grabbed us was the act itself.

What made the lone, piercing cry of “You lie!” shocking was that it breached a previously secure barrier. It was the first time that the violent rage surging in town-hall meetings all summer blasted into the same room as the president. Wilson’s televised shout was tantamount to yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater. When [he later explained](#) that his behavior was “spontaneous” rather than premeditated, that was even more disturbing. It’s not good for the country that a lawmaker can’t control his anger at Barack Obama. It gives permission to crazy people.

The White House was right [not to second Carter’s motion](#) and cue another “national conversation about race.” No matter how many teachable moments we have, some people won’t be taught. (Though how satisfying it would have been for Obama to dismiss Wilson, [like the boorish Kanye West](#), as a “jackass.”) But there is a national conversation we must have right now — the one about what, in addition to race, is driving this anger and what can be done about it. We are kidding ourselves if we think it’s only about bigotry, or health care, or even Obama. The growing minority that feels disenfranchised by Washington can’t be so easily ghettoized and dismissed.

Many of those Americans may hate Obama, but they don’t love the Republican establishment either. Michael Steele, who was declared [persona non grata at one of the mad “tea parties” in April](#), was not invited to that right-wing 9/12 March on Washington last weekend. There were no public encomiums for McCain or Bush. No Senate leader spoke to the gathering, and perhaps only Palin and Ron Paul would have been welcome from the ranks of what passes for G.O.P. presidential timber. If there was a real hero to this crowd, it was the protest’s most prominent promoter, the radio and TV talker Glenn Beck.

Time put [Beck on its cover this week](#). Man of the Year may not be far behind. Beck is not, as many liberals assume, merely the latest incarnation of Rush Limbaugh. He is something different. That’s why he is gaining on his antecedents — and gaining traction in the country’s angrier precincts.

Though Beck’s daily Fox News show is in the sleepy slot of 5 p.m., his ratings are increasingly neck and neck with the prime-time tag team of Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, and he has [beaten them](#) in the prized

25-to-54 demographic. It's not just because he is younger (45). This self-described "[rodeo clown](#)," who wells up with tears for dramatic effect, doesn't come across as cranky or pompous, like Limbaugh and O'Reilly. A [fervent Mormon convert and proselytizer](#), he is untainted by association with the old Dobson-Robertson-Reed religious right. Unlike Limbaugh, he bonds with his fallible listeners by openly and repeatedly owning up to his own mistakes, including his history of drug and alcohol abuse. Unlike Hannity, he is not a Republican apparatchik.

Beck has notoriously [defamed Obama](#) as a "racist," but the race card is just one in his deck. His ideology, if it can be called that, mixes idolatrous [Ayn Rand libertarianism](#) with bumper-sticker slogans about "freedom," self-help homilies and lunatic conspiracy theories. (He [fanned Internet rumors](#) that FEMA was establishing concentration camps before [tardily beating a retreat](#).) It's the same crazy-quilt cosmology that could be found in last weekend's Washington protest, where the marchers variously called Obama a fascist, a communist and a socialist, likening him to Hitler, Stalin, Castro and Pol Pot. They may not know that some of these libels are mutually exclusive. But what they do know is that they need a scapegoat for what ails them, and there is no one handier than a liberal, all-powerful president (who just happens to be black).

Beck captures this crowd's common emotional denominator — with appropriately overheated capital letters — in his best-selling book portraying himself as a latter-day Tom Paine, "Glenn Beck's Common Sense." Americans "know that SOMETHING JUST DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT," he writes, "but they don't know how to describe it or, more importantly, how to stop it." This is right-wing populism in the classic American style, as inchoate and paranoid as that hawked by Father Coughlin during the Great Depression and George Wallace in the late 1960s. Wallace is most remembered for his racism, but he, like Beck, also played on the class and cultural resentment of those sharing his view that there wasn't "[a dime's worth of difference](#)" between the two parties.

Now, as then, a Dixie-oriented movement like this won't remotely capture the White House. Now, unlike then, it is a catastrophe for the Republicans. The old G.O.P. Southern strategy is gone with the wind. The more the party is identified with nasty name-calling, freak-show protestors, immigrant-bashing (the proximate cause of Wilson's outburst at Obama) and, yes, racism, the faster it will commit demographic suicide as America becomes ever younger and more diverse. But Democrats shouldn't be cocky. Over the short term, the real economic grievances lurking beneath the extremism of the Beck brigades can do damage to both parties. A stopped clock is right twice a day. The recession-spawned anger that Beck has tapped into on the right could yet find a more mainstream outlet in a populist revolt from the left and center.

"Wall Street owns our government," Beck declared in one rant this July. "Our government and these gigantic corporations have merged." He [drew a chart](#) to dramatize the revolving door between Washington and Goldman Sachs in both the Hank Paulson and Timothy Geithner Treasury departments. A couple of weeks later, Beck [mockingly replaced](#) the stars on the American flag with the logos of corporate giants like G.E., General Motors, Wal-Mart and Citigroup (as well as the right's usual nemesis, the Service Employees International Union). Little of it would be out of place in a [Matt Taibbi article in Rolling Stone](#). Or, we can assume, in Michael Moore's coming film, "Capitalism: A Love Story," which reportedly takes on Goldman and the Obama economic team along with conservative targets.

Unlike liberal critics of capitalist inequities, of course, Beck and his clique are driven by an over-the-top detestation of government. Washington is always the enemy, stealing their hard-earned money to redistribute it to the undeserving and shiftless poor (some of whom just happen to be immigrants or black). Though there is nothing Obama can do to stop racists from being racist, he could help stanch the economic piece of this by demonstrating how a reformed government can at times actually make Americans' lives better. That's what F.D.R. did, and that's the promise Obama made, swaying some Republicans and even some racists, during the campaign.

Too many Americans are impatiently waiting for results. It's hard to argue that the stimulus package reviled by big government-loathers is a success when unemployment continues to rise and most Americans feel none of the incipient "recovery" [spotted by Ben Bernanke](#). The potential dividends to be gained at the end of the protracted health care debate also remain, for now, an abstraction to many who have lost and are continuing to lose their jobs, their savings and their homes.

Nor has Obama succeeded in persuading critics on the left or right that he will do as much for those Americans who are suffering as he has for the corporations his administration and his predecessor's rushed to rescue. To mark the anniversary of Lehman's fall, the president [gave a speech on Wall Street last Monday again vowing reform](#). But everyone's back to business as usual: [The Wall Street Journal reported](#) that not a single C.E.O. from a top bank attended. The speech sank with scant notice because there has been so little action to back it up and because its conciliatory stance was tone-deaf to the anger beyond the financial district.

That same day a United States District Court judge in New York, Jed S. Rakoff, [scathingly condemned](#) the Obama Securities and Exchange Commission for letting Bank of America skate away with what Rakoff called an immoral and unjust wrist tap to settle charges that it covered up \$3.6 billion [paid out in bonuses when it purchased Merrill Lynch](#). How is this S.E.C. a change from the Clinton-Bush S.E.C. that ignored all the red flags on Bernie Madoff?

Beck frequently strikes the pose of an apocalyptic prophet, even [insisting that he predicted 9/11](#). This summer he also started [warning of domestic terrorism](#) in the form of a new Timothy McVeigh. On this, one fears he knows whereof he speaks. For all our nation's unfinished business on race, racism is not Obama's biggest challenge during our unfinished Great Recession. He — and our political system — are being seriously tested by a rage that is no less real for being shouted by a demagogue from Fox and a backbencher from South Carolina.

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