

June 14, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Obama Haters' Silent Enablers

By [FRANK RICH](#)

WHEN a Fox News anchor, reacting to his own network's surging e-mail traffic, [warns urgently on-camera](#) of a rise in hate-filled, "amped up" Americans who are "taking the extra step and getting the gun out," maybe we should listen. He has better sources in that underground than most.

The anchor was Shepard Smith, speaking after Wednesday's [mayhem at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) in Washington. Unlike the bloviators at his network and elsewhere on cable, Smith is famous for his highly caffeinated news-reading, not any political agenda. But very occasionally — notably during Hurricane Katrina — he hits the Howard Beale mad-as-hell wall. Joining those at Fox who routinely disregard the network's "We report, you decide" mantra, he both reported and decided, loudly.

What he reported was this: his e-mail from viewers had "become more and more frightening" in recent months, dating back to the election season. From Wednesday alone, he "could read a hundred" messages spewing "hate that's not based in fact," much of it about Barack Obama and some of it sharing the museum gunman's canard that the president was not a naturally born citizen. These are Americans "out there in a scary place," Smith said.

Then he brought up another recent gunman: "If you're one who believes that abortion is murder, at what point do you go out and kill someone who's performing abortions?" An answer, he said, was provided by Dr. George Tiller's killer. He went on: "If you are one who believes these sorts of things about the president of the United States ..." He left the rest of that chilling sentence unsaid.

These are extraordinary words to hear on Fox. The network's highest-rated star, Bill O'Reilly, had assailed Tiller, calling him "Tiller the baby killer" and likening him to the Nazis, [on 29 of his shows](#) before the doctor was murdered at his church in Kansas. O'Reilly [was unrepentant](#), stating that only "pro-abortion zealots and Fox News haters" would link him to the crime. But now another Fox star, while stopping short of blaming O'Reilly, was breaching his network's brand of political correctness: he tied the far-right loners who had gotten their guns out in Wichita and Washington to the mounting fury of Obama haters.

What is this fury about? In his scant 145 days in office, the new president has [not remotely matched the Bush record in deficit creation](#). Nor has he repealed the right to bear arms or exacerbated the wars he inherited. He has tried more than his predecessor ever did to reach across the aisle. But none of that seems to matter. A sizable minority of Americans is irrationally fearful of the fast-moving generational, cultural and racial turnover Obama embodies — indeed, of the 21st century itself. That minority is now getting angrier in inverse relationship to his popularity with the vast majority of the country. Change can be frightening and traumatic, especially if it's not change you can believe in.

We don't know whether the tiny subset of domestic terrorists in this crowd is egged on by political or media demagogues — though we do tend to assume that foreign jihadists respond like Pavlov's dogs to the words of their most fanatical leaders and polemicists. But well before the latest murderers struck — well before another “antigovernment” Obama hater went on a cop-killing [rampage in Pittsburgh in April](#) — there have been indications that this rage could spiral out of control.

This was evident during the campaign, when [hotheads greeted Obama's name](#) with “Treason!” and “Terrorist!” at G.O.P. rallies. At first the McCain-Palin campaign [fed the anger with accusations](#) that Obama was “palling around with terrorists.” But later John McCain thought better of it and [defended his opponent's honor](#) to a town-hall participant who vented her fears of the Democrats' “Arab” candidate. Although two neo-Nazi skinheads [were arrested in an assassination plot](#) against Obama two weeks before Election Day, the fever broke after McCain exercised leadership.

That honeymoon, if it was one, is over. Conservatives have legitimate ideological beefs with Obama, rightly expressed in sharp language. But the invective in some quarters has unmistakably amped up. The writer Camille Paglia, a political independent and confessed talk-radio fan, detected a shift toward paranoia in the air waves by mid-May. When “the tone darkens toward a rhetoric of purgation and annihilation,” [she observed in Salon](#), “there is reason for alarm.” She cited a “joke” repeated by a Rush Limbaugh fill-in host, a talk-radio jock from Dallas of all places, about how “any U.S. soldier” who found himself with only two bullets in an elevator with Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid and Osama bin Laden would use both shots to assassinate Pelosi and then strangle Reid and bin Laden.

This homicide-saturated vituperation is endemic among mini-Limbaughs. Glenn Beck has dipped into O'Reilly's Holocaust analogies to [liken Obama's policy on stem-cell research to the eugenics](#) that led to “the final solution” and the quest for “a master race.” After James von Brunn's rampage at the Holocaust museum, [Beck rushed onto Fox News to describe the Obama-hating killer](#) as a “lone gunman nutjob.” Yet in the same show Beck also said von Brunn was a symptom that “the pot in America is boiling,” as if Beck himself were not the boiling pot cheering the kettle on.

But hyperbole from the usual suspects in the entertainment arena of TV and radio is not the whole story. What's startling is the spillover of this poison into the conservative political establishment. Saul Anuzis, a former Michigan G.O.P. chairman who ran for the party's national chairmanship this year, [seriously suggested in April that Republicans should stop calling Obama a socialist](#) because “it no longer has the negative connotation it had 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago.” Anuzis pushed “fascism” instead, because “everybody still thinks that's a bad thing.” He didn't seem to grasp that “fascism” is nonsensical as a description of the Obama administration or that there might be a risk in slurring a president with a word that most find “bad” because it evokes a mass-murderer like Hitler.

The Anuzis “fascism” solution to the Obama problem has caught fire. The president's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and his speech in Cairo have only exacerbated the ugliness. The venomous personal attacks on Sotomayor have little to do with [the 3,000-plus cases she's adjudicated](#) in nearly 17 years on the bench or [her thoughts about the judgment](#) of “a wise Latina woman.” She has been tarred as a member of “the Latino KKK” ([by the former Republican presidential candidate Tom Tancredo](#)), as well as a racist and a David Duke ([by Limbaugh](#)), and portrayed, in a bizarre two-for-one ethnic caricature, as [a](#)

[slant-eyed Asian on the cover of National Review](#). Uniting all these insults is an aggrieved note of white victimization only a shade less explicit than that in von Brunn's white supremacist screeds.

Obama's Cairo address, meanwhile, prompted over-the-top accusations reminiscent of those campaign rally cries of "Treason!" It was a prominent former Reagan defense official, Frank Gaffney, not some fringe crackpot, who [accused Obama in The Washington Times](#) of engaging "in the most consequential bait-and-switch since Adolf Hitler duped Neville Chamberlain." He claimed that the president — a lifelong Christian — "may still be" a Muslim and is aligned with "the dangerous global movement known as the Muslim Brotherhood." Gaffney linked Obama by innuendo with Islamic "charities" that "have been convicted of providing material support for terrorism."

If this isn't a handy rationalization for another lone nutjob to take the law into his own hands against a supposed terrorism supporter, what is? Any such nutjob can easily grab a weapon. Gun enthusiasts have been on a shopping spree since the election, with [some areas of our country reporting percentage sales increases in the mid-to-high double digits](#), recession be damned.

The question, [Shepard Smith said on Fox last week](#), is "if there is really a way to put a hold on" those who might run amok. We're not about to repeal the First or Second Amendments. Hard-core haters resolutely dismiss any "mainstream media" debunking of their conspiracy theories. The only voices that might penetrate their alternative reality — I emphasize might — belong to conservative leaders with the guts and clout to step up as McCain did last fall. Where are they? The genteel public debate in right-leaning intellectual circles about the conservative movement's future will be buried by history if these insistent alarms are met with silence.

It's typical of this dereliction of responsibility that when the Department of Homeland Security released a plausible (and, tragically, prescient) [report about far-right domestic terrorism](#) two months ago, the conservative response was to trash it as "the height of insult," [in the words of the G.O.P. chairman Michael Steele](#). But as Smith also said last week, Homeland Security was "warning us for a reason."

No matter. Last week it was business as usual, as Republican leaders nattered ad infinitum [over the juvenile rivalry of Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich](#) at the party's big Washington fund-raiser. Few if any mentioned, let alone questioned, the ominous script delivered by the actor Jon Voight with the G.O.P. imprimatur at that same event. Voight's devout wish was to ["bring an end to this false prophet Obama."](#)

This kind of rhetoric, with its pseudo-Scriptural call to action, is toxic. It is getting louder each day of the Obama presidency. No one, not even Fox News viewers, can say they weren't warned.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)