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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Where Did 'We' Go?

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I hate to write about this, but I have actually been to this play before and it is really disturbing.

I was in Israel interviewing Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin just before he was assassinated in 1995. We had a beer in his office. He needed one. I remember the ugly mood in Israel then — a mood in which extreme right-wing settlers and politicians were doing all they could to delegitimize Rabin, who was committed to trading land for peace as part of the Oslo accords. They questioned his authority. They accused him of treason. They created pictures depicting him as a Nazi SS officer, and they shouted death threats at rallies. His political opponents winked at it all.

And in so doing they created a poisonous political environment that was interpreted by one right-wing Jewish nationalist as a license to kill Rabin — he must have heard, “God will be on your side” — and so he did.

Others have already remarked on this analogy, but I want to add my voice because the parallels to Israel then and America today turn my stomach: I have no problem with any of the substantive criticism of President Obama from the right or left. But something very dangerous is happening. Criticism from the far right has begun tipping over into delegitimation and creating the same kind of climate here that existed in Israel on the eve of the Rabin assassination.

What kind of madness is it that someone would create a poll on Facebook asking respondents, “Should Obama be killed?” The choices were: “No, Maybe, Yes, and Yes if he cuts my health care.” The Secret Service is now investigating. I hope they put the jerk in jail and throw away the key because this is exactly what was being done to Rabin.

Even if you are not worried that someone might draw from these vitriolic attacks a license to try to hurt the president, you have to be worried about what is happening to American politics more broadly.

Our leaders, even the president, can no longer utter the word “we” with a straight face. There is no more “we” in American politics at a time when “we” have these huge problems — the deficit, the recession, health care, climate change and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — that “we” can only manage, let alone fix, if there is a collective “we” at work.

Sometimes I wonder whether George H.W. Bush, president “41,” will be remembered as our last “legitimate” president. The right impeached Bill Clinton and hounded him from Day 1 with the bogus Whitewater “scandal.” George W. Bush was elected under a cloud because of the Florida voting mess, and

his critics on the left never let him forget it.

And Mr. Obama is now having his legitimacy attacked by a concerted campaign from the right fringe. They are using everything from smears that he is a closet “socialist” to calling him a “liar” in the middle of a joint session of Congress to fabricating doubts about his birth in America and whether he is even a citizen. And these attacks are not just coming from the fringe. Now they come from Lou Dobbs on CNN and from members of the House of Representatives.

Again, hack away at the man’s policies and even his character all you want. I know politics is a tough business. But if we destroy the legitimacy of another president to lead or to pull the country together for what most Americans want most right now — nation-building at home — we are in serious trouble. We can’t go 24 years without a legitimate president — not without being swamped by the problems that we will end up postponing because we can’t address them rationally.

The American political system was, as the saying goes, “designed by geniuses so it could be run by idiots.” But a cocktail of political and technological trends have converged in the last decade that are making it possible for the idiots of all political stripes to overwhelm and paralyze the genius of our system.

Those factors are: the wild excess of money in politics; the gerrymandering of political districts, making them permanently Republican or Democratic and erasing the political middle; a 24/7 cable news cycle that makes all politics a daily battle of tactics that overwhelm strategic thinking; and a blogosphere that at its best enriches our debates, adding new checks on the establishment, and at its worst coarsens our debates to a whole new level, giving a new power to anonymous slanderers to send lies around the world. Finally, on top of it all, we now have a permanent presidential campaign that encourages all partisanship, all the time among our leading politicians.

I would argue that together these changes add up to a difference of degree that is a difference in kind — a different kind of American political scene that makes me wonder whether we can seriously discuss serious issues any longer and make decisions on the basis of the national interest.

We can’t change this overnight, but what we can change, and must change, is people crossing the line between criticizing the president and tacitly encouraging the unthinkable and the unforgivable.

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