

Defining Political Deviancy Down

By Jon Perr
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In 1993, Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously warned that American society was "[defining deviancy down](#)." To the approval of conservatives, Moynihan cautioned that when it came to crime, family breakdown and other social pathologies, "we have been re-defining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the 'normal' level in categories where behavior is now abnormal by any earlier standard."

Now 16 years later, so it is with American political culture. As this week's Tax Day Tea Parties showed, events sponsored by [Fox News](#) and [conservative lobbyists](#), revolution, secession and other incitements to violence once beyond the pale of acceptable political discourse are now treated as mainstream. No doubt, the Republican Party and the conservative movement are defining political deviancy down.

Secession. At the horrific cost of 640,000 American lives, the Civil War forever settled the question of whether a state can leave the Union. As [Christopher Hitchens](#) recently noted in praise of Lincoln, "one must remember that, before Gettysburg, people would say, 'the United States are ...' After Gettysburg, they began to say, 'the United States is.' Was there ever a nuance that contained more historical punch?"

But what was blasphemy since 1865 is now a common refrain for Republican politicians pandering to the frothing-at-the-mouth followers of the raging right. Two weeks ago, the Georgia Senate voted 43-1 on a resolution embracing notions of secession and nullification that long ago burned with Atlanta. And with the support of former House Majority Leader [Tom Delay](#), Texas Governor [Rick Perry](#) on Wednesday proclaimed his state's sovereignty while warning:

"We've got a great union. There's absolutely no reason to dissolve it. But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what might come out of that. But Texas is a very unique place, and we're a pretty independent lot to boot."

That the monstrous is now mainstream was chillingly - if ironically - reflected in a report by Fox News' [Glenn Beck](#) at a tea-bagging rally in Austin. To alternating cheers of "SECEDE!" and "USA!", Beck endorsed signs proclaiming Texas independence. Of course, just the day before, he announced:

"You can't convince me that the founding fathers wouldn't allow you to secede. The constitution is not a suicide pact."

Revolution. Calls for revolution have a staple of the loony left and the raging right for years. But what was denounced as raving when it came from left-wing fringe groups now enjoys calm acceptance among conservative politicians and their right-wing echo chamber in the media.

Even before Wednesday's ersatz tea parties, the usual suspects among the conservative commentariat were clamoring for "[revolution](#)" while confusedly denouncing President Obama as a [socialist, communist and fascist](#). But a [Virginia rally](#) where former Rep. Virgil Goode launched into a tirade against "illegal immigrants," conservative commentator George Caylor announced, "The next American revolution begins here and begins tonight." Meanwhile, at the [same event](#) which featured Governor Perry and Texas Republican chair Tina Binkiser, conservative radio commentator Rick Green declared:

"We are firing the first shots of the 2nd American revolution right here in Texas."

Inciting Violence. In other times, conservatives' casual talk of sedition and revolution might be brushed off as hyperbole and metaphorical flights of fancy. But after the recent politically-motivated bloodbaths [in Pittsburgh and Tennessee](#) wrought by acolytes of right-wing hate, suggestions like those of Rep. [Michele Bachmann](#) ("I want people in Minnesota armed and dangerous") or Illinois' [Mark Kirk](#) ("I think the people of Illinois are ready to shoot anyone who is going to raise taxes by that degree") don't seem so funny.

As I recently suggested in describing the [seamless continuum](#) from Republican rhetoric to right-wing terror:

Whether concerning guns, abortion, gay Americans, immigration or judicial appointments, the line connecting the rhetoric of the Republican Party and the mainstream conservative movement behind it to right-wing terror is a very short one...

Increasingly, the conservative movement finds its strongest support at the dark nexus inhabited by gun rights advocates, religious zealots, white supremacists, anti-immigrant xenophobes, pro-life activists and anti-government crusaders.

To be sure, some of the leading lights of the Republican Party are among the most irresponsible when it comes to casual - and dangerous - incitements to violence. In the wake of the Terri Schiavo affair, [John Cornyn](#) (R-TX) took to the Senate floor just days after the murders of a judge in Atlanta and the spouse of another in Chicago to offer his endorsement of judicial intimidation:

"I don't know if there is a cause-and-effect connection, but we have seen some recent episodes of courthouse violence in this country...And I wonder whether there may be some connection between the perception in some quarters, on some occasions, where judges are making political decisions yet are unaccountable to the public, that it builds up and builds up and builds up to the point where some people engage in, engage in violence."

His Lone Star State colleague [Tom Delay](#) agreed, darkly warning, "The time will come for the men responsible for this to answer for their behavior, but not today."

Alaska Governor [Sarah Palin](#), too, got in the act, this time regarding anti-abortion terrorists like killers Eric Rudolph and James Kopp. While even Attorney General John Ashcroft [used the "T" word](#) to describe Rudolph upon his arrest in 2003, during an October 2008 interview with NBC's Brian Williams Palin refused to similarly brand violent right-wing radicals as the terrorists. "I don't know," Palin said, "if you're going to use the word terrorist there."

Hating the Other. While nothing warms the cockles of the conservative heart more than to proclaim "liberals hate America," the tea party gatherings showed once again that right-wingers hate Americans, or more accurately, certain groups of Americans.

As I wrote in "[The Party of Hate](#)" back in 2007:

"With its evangelical base splintered and big business supporters jumping ship, the only message seemingly uniting Republicans is disdain - of immigrants, of blacks, of gay Americans and above all, Muslims."

For the beaten, battered and downtrodden ranks of the Republican faithful, seemingly all that remains of the once proud party of ideas of Buckley, Goldwater and Reagan is seething hatred of "the other." At Wednesday's tea parties, the [signs were everywhere](#). As [ThinkProgress](#) noted, at a Madison, Wisconsin event which featured [House GOP budget architect Paul Ryan](#):

The signs included messages such as "Obama's Plan White Slavery," "Obama is the Antichrist," "Obama Terrorist to America in God we trust," and signs honoring the standoff at Ruby Ridge.

To be sure, inflammatory and extremist ideologues exist at both ends of the political spectrum. But while liberal voices advocating positions broadly shared by the American public are largely excluded and derided by the mainstream media, the mouthpieces of right-wing venom increasingly have both a seat at the table and their own broadcast network. As [Glenn Greenwald](#) put it to Bill Moyers in a February discussion of Rush Limbaugh's ascendancy in Republican politics:

"All of the conventional cliches that the media airs frequently, and doesn't need much time in order to explain, are ones that Rush Limbaugh and the furthest fringes of the right essentially embrace.

And so, to include them into our discussion is not very disruptive at all, whereas if you had people on from the left...these views are un-serious views, don't belong in mainstream, serious shows. Because these views are never heard. They're stigmatized, they're demonized as being things that don't really deserve a platform."

Aggravating matters further is the transformation of the media landscape itself, a tectonic change which confers built-in advantages to conservative propagandists. As I noted in "[Politics as Theater](#)" last year:

Politics must now compete with an oversupply of entertainment and information sources, from television, radio, books, newspapers and magazines to web sites, blogs, online video, Podcasts and more. The result is a 21st century "infotainment complex" where politics, news, opinion and entertainment merge. Politics itself is now entertainment, part drama and part competition in a passion play where confrontation, conflict and good versus evil rule the day. The journalistic search for objective truth is replaced by the presentation of ideological clashes with two - and only two - sides.

As the audience numbers for Fox News and right-wing radio show, that format is sadly a winner for conservatives.

The furious conservative reaction to the [DHS report](#) on the threat from right-wing terror is a case in point. Washington Post columnist and Fox News regular [Charles Krauthammer](#) portrayed the warnings about "indication[s] of insurrection or treason or extremism" as "absurd" and a "demonstration of the paranoid style of thinking on the American left."

Of course, it was the same Charles Krauthammer who in 1993 responded to Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a piece titled, "[Defining Deviancy Up](#)." In it, the psychiatrist turned Republican ideologue offered a future defense for the right-wing extremism on display this week:

"Moynihan is right. But it is only half the story. There is a complimentary social phenomenon that goes with defining deviancy down. As part of the vast social project of moral leveling, it is not enough for the deviant to be normalized. The normal must be found to be deviant...Large areas of ordinary behavior hitherto considered benign have had their threshold radically redefined up, so that once innocent behavior now stands condemned as deviant."

Apparently, for the Republicans and their water carriers, talk of secession, revolution, violence and treason is rapidly entering the realm of "ordinary behavior."

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