

Can Too Much Freedom Destroy Democracy?  
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We have just gone through a summer of obnoxious free speech\227which the First Amendment of our Constitution is designed to protect. But there is one caveat in our protection of free speech: it must not pose a public danger (rousing a mob to violence, encouraging assassination of public officials, or falsely shouting \223fire!  
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in a crowded theater).

I would say we are getting close to that caveat\227and have been teetering on this brink for some time.

The summer\222s rallies against the proposed health care reform were, for the most part, legitimate expressions of disagreement. However, there were some that were addressed not at the legislation, but at the President with a message that was alarming. People carried placards showing President Obama with a Hitler mustache; dressed as an African native dancer; and some that recommended that Obama be buried with the late Senator Kennedy.

Among the attackers were those who insisted that our first Black president was not an American\227making silly allegations that he was really born in Indonesia or Kenya (the \223Birthers\224) or others even more transparently who rejected the notion that a Black man could be president. This is not the majority of us who are, I believe, the most polite people in the world; it is courtesy that comes from good nature, not compulsion.

However, this nasty rhetoric recalls the sort of materials (paid ads) that were in the Dallas newspapers on November 22, 1962 the day that our young president\222s assassination horrified the nation. House Leader Nancy Pelosi recalled the sort of rhetoric that was current in San Francisco in the 1970s when an assassin murdered the Mayor and a councilman. Such an environment is toxic.

We have always had a rough and tumble culture in the past. From our first elections in the 19th century, there were nasty personal attacks by candidates against their competitors\227including terrible behavior by our esteemed Thomas Jefferson against his friend and competitor\227John Adams. The rest of the 19th century was a dreadful example of free speech gone at worst, amok, and at best, vulgar. But worst of all were the attacks on Abraham Lincoln, and this environment may well have spurred on his assassin. Bad ideas are infectious.

But it seems to me that the 20th century provided an improvement in public behavior over the prior century. Of course candidates said nasty things about each other\227and there were those who were livid at the policies of their presidents (both Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt)\227but the rhetoric rarely rose to the point of provocation to murder. So when did things change?

I would trace the problem to the Free Speech Movement that began in Berkeley. Certainly well intentioned, this movement had consequences that dissolved all courtesy and not only increased the violence level, but the vulgarity level. Political discourse became ever nastier and the Black Hip Hop movement brought the ugliness and violence into daily life\227particularly against women.

Today, with the Internet, anything goes. I have seen vile texts on Internet and the lack of civility even in the halls of Academe. Rudeness, profanity, and suggestions of violence have become routine. We are brutalized by this\227and the very structure of our country is in danger.

Nastiness against our elected presidents has increased from the Clinton, through the Bush, and now the Obama administrations. The sort of hateful rhetoric hurled at President Bush made me ashamed; he was my president, even though I had not voted for him. But I didn\222t fear a left-wing assassin because then Vice President Cheney would have become president, which they certainly did not want. But with President Obama, the attacks have stirred up some of the ugliest factions, home-made terrorists (KKK and Skinheads) and others like them\227who do not appear reluctant to take him out violently. We are seeing an ugly American underbelly.

It frightens me\227and makes me fear for our democracy. When does free speech become murderous speech\227or set the tone for a psychopath to act?

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