

JONATHAN YARDLEY

Drive-Time Drivel

The trouble with having Bill Clinton in residence as chief evangelist and scold is that it's just about impossible to discern the motives behind his public utterances. His words last week about "purveyors of hate" were eloquent and to the point. One would like to think it unfair to accuse him of playing politics with Oklahoma City—Charles Krauthammer, for one, said he "went from consoler of the nation to cheap politician in less than 24 hours"—yet the long and lamentably crowded history of Clintonian opportunism does give one pause.

What a pity this is, not merely because we have as president a man who stirs distrust even when he apparently means to do good, but because the prevailing national climate begs for a calming dose of reason and responsibility. The bomb in Oklahoma was not ignited by Rush Limbaugh or G. Gordon Liddy, but they are significant as well as highly visible fomenters of a mood that is fairly described as hateful, i.e., full of hate. As has been said by others, indeed as has often been said in this space, plenty of "hate speech" arises from the same left wing that attempts to suppress offensive speech by those with whom it disagrees, but the speech at issue in this instance comes from the right; it is not helpful to drag in the left, as Krauthammer does, when for once the left is even more irrelevant than usual.

The eminently sensible point was made to me last week that if the events of the past two weeks had occurred four decades ago, the result would have been an outbreak of anti-communist retribution of such dimensions as to make the Red Scare of the 1920s seem a friendly game of cards. The bombing of a federal building and the murder of scores therein would have been

immediately assumed to be the work of Communists, and public pressure for detention and trial of anyone remotely suspected of Muscovite sympathies would have been irresistible. On top of that, the demand that they be denied freedom of speech would have been shouted from every available rooftop.

But in the labyrinthine passages of the American mind, imported subversion is one thing and the home-grown variety quite another. We have always had a quite remarkable tolerance for hyper-patriotic lunacy, as Father Coughlin proved in the 1930s and Joe McCarthy in the 1950s. Wrap it in the flag and Americans can get away with just about anything. The picture in the newspapers last week of people lining up for the autograph of a functionary of the Michigan Militia just about said it all; to these people, this tinhorn Patton is actually a hero.

So too, to many Americans, are Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy and Oliver North and all the others who screech at us incessantly from every radio receiver. A medium that once gave us song now gives us an unending diet of invective, background music for a nation in the grip of a truly weird dichotomy: on the one hand more tolerant than ever of what we now call "diversity," on the other hand seething with anger at government and all those who allegedly benefit from it.

The appeal of these "talk show hosts" is, alas, utterly beyond my ken; indeed the mere sound of their overwrought voices gives me the creeps. My present fate in this vale of tears seems to be that at any moment when I change CDs in the car stereo, the voice of Limbaugh leaps out to assault me. It did that one morning last week, when I was the involuntary victim of a Limbaugh whine on the

subject of culpability for Oklahoma City: Limbaugh, of course, found himself not guilty.

So do I, in the conviction that the distance between speech and action is wide and that it is exceedingly difficult for anyone to understand how and why it is closed. But anyone who thinks that the right-wing zealots of talk radio are merely mouthing off is fooling himself. If it is true, as Krauthammer wrote of the truck bomb, that the difference between yesterday's lunatics and today's "is that technology enables even the smallest, most marginalized group to do great damage," then it is no less true that the sophisticated technology of mass communications enables little people to make a very loud noise.

The real question isn't of culpability but of climate. Nuts are going to crack even in the most irenic of circumstances, and the early evidence out of Oklahoma suggests that in this instance we are dealing with derangement of the most implacable sort. But an atmosphere permeated with irresponsible rhetoric of an inflammatory nature directed at the government, at those who work for it and at specific subgroups within the population is not exactly conducive to orderly resolution of the differences among us.

Speech *does* have consequences. When Henry V urged his troops "Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more, / Or close the wall up with our English dead!" they took heart and followed him into battle, just as, many centuries later, the people of England took heart from the inspirational oratory of Winston Churchill. If the precise effect of words is impossible to measure, the potential effect is

unquestionable. That such an effect is achieved by the talk show hosts, who are granted a presence in radio out of all proportion to their actual numbers, is equally so.

Presumably many who are offended by these people find it no less offensive that they are permitted to spew their nonsense over airwaves owned and licensed by the public. This is indeed peculiar, but it is a distinctly American peculiarity. One of the ways we ensure freedom of speech is to assure it to those who use publicly licensed media as well as those who use private ones, such as this newspaper. It is a system that contains within its very character the probability of abuse, but it is not a system we want to change.

What is considerably more offensive about the talk show hosts is that they do their overheated business not in the name of politics but in the service of entertainment. Their shows exist not to provide edification or enlightenment or even debate, but to feed red meat to their audiences. The bigger their audiences, the more money to be made by all concerned; by the standards of most of us, Limbaugh is a wealthy man indeed. Fine; it's the American way. But do us all a favor and don't fob it off as anything more than drive-time titillation.

One final note. "Clinton has found his weapon: the dead of Oklahoma." That astonishing statement was made last week not by Rush Limbaugh but by Charles Krauthammer. When unfiltered meanness such as this is to be found not merely in talk radio but in the work of a columnist usually distinguished by common sense, we need no further proof that public discourse is polluted to the core.