

# Democracy Without the Facts

The debate over whether hate speech provokes violence misses a less deadly but equally important consequence.

When wildly exaggerated hate speech becomes commonplace, it eats away like acid at an essential fiber of democracy: the civic ability to appreciate facts and argue viewpoints with some clarity in the knowledge that those who differ do so within the bounds of shared goals and values.

Look at what a few years of such treatment can do to an issue as innocuous as the preservation of biodiversity. It has turned a rather dry scientific discussion into a matter for rage and fury touching Americans' most sensitive nerves. We now have a national shouting match in which the real issues are unrecognizable.

The process begins with turning someone, in this case environmentalists, into an alien "other." They are, said James Watt, "a left-wing cult which seeks to bring down the type of government I believe in."

From there it's a short step to harsher talk, sometimes meant in jest, but which leaves an aftertaste all the same. Asked what his party's farm policy would be, former agriculture secretary Edward Madigan answered, "More money, higher income, more markets. String all the environmentalists up."

Then come more serious charges of Nazism, fascism, socialism or any other hated ideology. Hitler "considered himself an ecologist" (columnist Alston Chase), which makes it easier to liken Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, among others, to the *Führer*. Such speech is soon condoned even in Congress. "Ultimately a NBS will lead to the establishment of a militant eco-Gestapo force" (Rep. Bill Emerson (R-Mo.) on the creation of a National Biological Survey). Others have their own bogeymen. "The Rio Declaration is a very dangerous . . . socialist philosophy that is being rejected all over the world" (Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex)).

Pretty soon a link is made to religion. "The preservationists are like a new pagan religion," opposing them is a "holy war" (Charles Cushman, National Inholders Association).

A whiff of conspiracy appears. "Christian scholars accurately predicted [that] the environment would . . . be the just cause that would-be dictators would use to return us to the totalitarian days of the pre-industrial era" (Edward Krug, Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow).

Political conspiracies follow. "Powerful insiders are riding the issues of environmental crises . . . to realize their dream of a new world order, which may be defined as socialist one-world government" (letter to the editor, the New American). There is "a larger game plan to make the United Nations the centerpiece of a new world empire . . . [in which] the nation-state will disappear" (ad in The Washington Post by the Schiller Institute).

In our over-faxed society such ravings travel quickly, acquiring the trappings of truth. Journalist Ryan Ross, recently traced in this newspaper (Outlook, April 23) how the nutty views of a single Lyndon LaRouche follower made their way through groups in the Wise Use coalition to mainstream organizations like the American Farm Bureau, producing an avalanche of citizen opposition to the Global Biodiversity Treaty, all based on nonsense.

One of the Action Alert faxes that reached my machine reads, in part, "The U.S. would revert, under this treaty, to a colonial form of government with less freedom than we had before the American Revolution. . . . The treaty violates . . . separation of Church and State. Biodiversity is . . . a religious dogma which . . . will force Americans to worship nature."

Ignoring a 16 to 3 Senate committee vote in the treaty's favor, and its endorsement by numerous pharmaceutical

and agricultural businesses, Congress let the ratification of this mild agreement die on the weight of such argument.

The treaty is not the only casualty. In a facts-be-damned atmosphere, facts are a threat. And so a national survey of species—necessary for sensible, effective protection—is out of the question.

A rational discussion about how to strengthen the Endangered Species Act while lightening its regulatory burden, is impossible. Opponents, led by Rep. Billy Tauzin (D-La.), keep feelings raw, beyond any resemblance to the law's impact. "It's almost party time in America. . . . It's steaming and the lid's about to blow."

The act is also the principal vehicle for takings legislation that gives direct voice to the view that Americans can best live together by pursuing their 260 million individual property rights. Government, after all, from local zoning to federal health and safety rules, only takes away.

In the West, all this rhetoric has turned into violence, with bombings and armed threats against federal parks and wildlife employees. Forest Service workers are now urged to travel in pairs and not wear their uniforms. The acts are legitimized by irresponsible members of Congress, like Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho), who speak of "a healthy fear" of federal workers. Even after Oklahoma City, Rush Limbaugh warns that "the second violent American revolution" is imminent because of some imagined environmental threat.

A democracy demands a lot of its members. It requires trust in each other and of government, and vigorous but honest debate. Its citizens, in Vaclav Havel's words, must always "live within the truth." That quality is in some jeopardy in this country today.

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