

Leading On the Lunatics

History Shows the Dangers in the GOP's Failure to Disavow Extremists

By Jeffrey Herf

MORE THAN three months after the Oklahoma City bombing it is sadly apparent that the leaders of the Republican Party have failed to learn the key lessons from the bombing. The fact that Congress held another round of hearings on the Waco disaster rather than on the emergence of the armed radical right is another indication of the party's errant moral compass. The Republicans seem more interested in appeasing their right wing than in accepting political and moral responsibility to protect liberal democracy against the undemocratic extremes that hover at or just beyond its fringes.

No one has a better understanding of this point than German politicians and intellectuals. After World War II, they had to think long and hard about the vulnerability of democracy. We can and should learn from their reflection. Determined to avoid a repetition of the Nazi catastrophe, postwar German political leaders spoke of what they called an "anti-totalitarian consensus" articulated by "militant democrats." (At the same time, American intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesing-

er Jr. were speaking of a "vital center.") The Germans had learned the hard way that the erosion of the boundaries between democratic and undemocratic discourse could lead to disaster.

The German consensus spanned the political spectrum. Conservatives, chastened by the alliance between Nazis and conservatives at the end of the Weimar Republic, were determined not to repeat those mistakes. Social democrats, after the war, defeated the efforts of postwar communists to dominate a popular front of the left. In both cases, the fundamental fault line in democratic politics was said to run between democrats of the right and the left, on the one hand, and advocates of dictatorship and totalitarianism, of the right and left, on the other. Just as the democratic left kept the communist left at bay, so it was the responsibility of the parties of the democratic right to protect democracy from a revival of Nazism and fascism.

While the advocates of militant democracy were fierce anti-Nazis, they departed from the idea that gained currency in Europe during the anti-fascist agitation of the 1930s that there were "no enemies on the left." Such a view, originally intended as a short-term tactical response to the rise of Nazism, soon degenerated into an intellectual ban on forthright criticism of communist dictatorships by those left of center. Scholars have effectively documented the resurging illusions and

blindness of left-of-center intellectuals and politicians.

We must not mimic this sad history with a new version of "no enemies on the right." Though much was made of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe this May, some of the Republican leaders seem to have forgotten that threats to liberal democracy in this century also came from the radical right. Fifty years of Cold War against the Soviet Union and communism meant that right-of-center parties were rarely, if ever, forced to reflect much on threats to liberal democracy from the fascist, Nazi, radical right wing.

Yet it was fascists and Nazis, not communists, who actually succeeded in destroying functioning democracies in this century in Italy (1922) and Germany (1933), and who started World War II. While conservatives may enjoy quoting Winston Churchill, it is essential to recall that he was an exception who proved the rule of the failure of European conservatives and American Republicans in the 1930s to stand up at an early point to the threat of Nazism.

Is today's Republican Party again going to be tone deaf to threats from the radical right? The failure of moderate leadership of the national Republican Party to recognize, and denounce, the emergence of the far right within and on the fringes of American politics is not a hope-

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ful sign. It would be appropriate for the party's leaders to censure, criticize, ridicule and, yes, exclude advocates of paranoid, conspiratorial and antisemitic views within its own ranks, such as Pat Robertson. By refraining from making the extremist right within the Republican Party an issue, the moderate national leadership in Washington has lent legitimacy to views that it knows to be delusional and crackpot.

The failure of Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole to speak out since April 19 is especially disappointing. The responses of House Speaker Newt Gingrich and presidential aspirant Phil Gramm are less surprising but perhaps even more pernicious. Gramm addressed the National Rifle Association's annual meeting and said nothing about the organization's destructive rhetoric. Gingrich, far from creating a clear and firm boundary between the democratic and the undemocratic paranoid right, has called "despicable" suggestions that recent attacks on government could have anything at all to do with a climate in which the Oklahoma City bombing could take place.

Gingrich did not find "despicable" statements by Helen Chenoweth (R-Idaho) and Steve Stockman (R-Tex.), two members of his own party, who have indicated their empathy for the conspiratorial theories of the far right. Instead, on NBC's "Meet the Press" he defended Chenoweth: "There is in rural America a genuine fear of the federal government and of Washington, D.C., as a place that doesn't understand their way of life and doesn't understand their values." By focusing on already investigated and extensively criticized law enforcement agencies, the recently concluded Waco hearings continued this pattern of appeasement of the far right.

When such a conspiratorial mind-set is accepted in the Republican Party, the radical right ceases to live in a climate in which it is subjected to regular moral and political criticism and denunciation. As a result the hard core of the lunatic right feels emboldened while a confused part of the electorate becomes willing to give paranoid politics a hearing. Because the anti-government, anti-taxation, anti-gun-control discourse of the democratic right merges with the lunatic discourse of the armed militias, the failure of the establishment to denounce the lunatic right has been particularly devastating.

The Oklahoma City bombing and the world of armed militias that has belatedly come to public attention reminds us that people who believe all our problems are caused by a small but powerful group that supposedly runs the world, are driven, sooner or later, to political murder in order to eliminate the source of all evil. Conservatives have not been shy when it comes to lecturing 17-year-old welfare mothers to assume responsibility. They cannot escape their own responsibility for having failed to protect this country from the extremist right.

The record of Dole, Gingrich, Gramm and other national Republican leaders since April 19 has been one of avoidance, denial, defensiveness and appeasement of the worst elements of American political life. They have made a Faustian bargain with the far right. They would not be the first group of politicians who underestimated the dangers of appeasement or overestimated their ability to contain the furies such policies unleash. The time for reviving a "militant democracy" and its "vital center" resting on a shared rejection of totalitarian and paranoid politics is tragically long overdue.
