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Driving the Conversation:

Are "supposedly respectable news organizations and political figures...giving aid and comfort to dangerous extremism," as Paul Krugman (among others) writes.

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Roger Pilon, Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute:

“ . . . the Krugman thesis would not be credible even if it were less selective.”

As in his economic analyses (“The U.S. isn’t doing enough to fight the economic crisis”), so too in his social analyses, Paul Krugman seems constitutionally unable to avoid overstatement. If “supposedly respectable news organizations and political figures are giving aid and comfort to dangerous extremism,” as Krugman claims, pointing exclusively to organizations and figures on the Right, we would expect to see rationales from those sources purporting to justify extremist acts. But we don’t. Say what you will about the Bill O’Reillys and Rush Limbaughs, they have repeatedly condemned the perpetrators of so-called hate crimes, even as they’ve condemned, for example, the gruesome late-term, albeit legal, abortions of a Dr. George Tiller.

Is there inconsistency in that? On the contrary – both speak to the sanctity of life. Does it give “aid and comfort to dangerous extremism”? Only if you believe, with the Krugmans of the world, that “we’re all in this together,” and therefore we must all be careful not to say anything that might prompt another to violence.

And so it’s speech that is to be curtailed, as in the pernicious “speech codes” we find today on college campuses, of all places, and the “Fairness Doctrine,” which lurks just below the surface of charges such as these. In a free society, we distinguish speech and action, permitting even unwelcomed and offensive speech, because we believe that individuals can choose and therefore are responsible for their own actions. We don’t hold accountable the many forces that may have “influenced” their actions.

From respect for free speech and individual responsibility, then, the Krugman thesis would not be credible

even if it were less selective. But its very selectivity gives the game away. It is little but a transparent and disingenuous effort to discredit “supposedly respectable news organizations and political figures” on the Right by holding them accountable, at some important level, for the actions of a few.

There is a larger issue here, however, but it cuts the other way. There is no question, as just noted, that culture does “influence” behavior. If recognizing that were the only thing on Krugman’s agenda, it would be unobjectionable. And there is no question either that we’ve seen a coarsening of the culture in recent decades. Compare simply the language in movies from the ’30s through the ’50s with the language today, or the comedy of that era with what passes for comedy today on Comedy Central. But where has that coarsening come from? Don’t look to the Right. When David Letterman makes crude remarks not about Sarah Palin but about her children (joking about the Palin family at a Yankees game, “there was one awkward moment during the seventh-inning stretch: Her daughter was knocked up by Alex Rodriguez”), where is the outrage from the Left? Where are the feminists? No, the agenda is political, and the “supposedly respectable news organizations and political figures” Krugman targets need to be rendered beneath respect.

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