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# What We Can Learn from Paul Wellstone (Really)

He was all the way to the left, but he believed in honest debate.

**S**everal years ago, at the height of the debate over Pres. George W. Bush's proposal for Social Security reform, I was invited to deliver a talk on the merits of personal accounts to a group of retired federal employees. This was not a group predisposed to my message, and, as I began to speak, the crowd became unruly. There were boos, chants, shouts — some of them obscene. Crumpled papers were thrown at the stage. Things were on the verge of getting out of hand.

Then the late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D., Minn.), who had earlier delivered the event's keynote address, came out on stage and admonished the crowd, calling for quiet, and insisting that I had a right to be heard. When things had quieted down, he turned to me and said, "Give them your best shot."

In the wake of the terrible tragedy in Arizona and some of the reaction to it, I think back upon Senator Wellstone's actions and see two important and relevant lessons (beyond the fact that even Democratic liberals can use firearms metaphors). One would have to have searched long and hard to find any issue that Senator Wellstone and I agreed on. We certainly didn't see eye-to-eye about Social Security reform. Yet the senator clearly believed that people would benefit from vigorous but civil debate.

Both sides of that equation are important. Debate should be vigorous. This country faces serious problems, and there are profound disagreements about how to solve those problems. Liberals, conservatives, and libertarians all have very different beliefs, sincerely and deeply held, about the role and nature of government, how it should be involved in the economy and our personal lives. Those differences cannot be papered over. Not all answers lie in the mushy middle.

Already, some are using this tragedy to try to delegitimize opinions that they disagree with. Paul Krugman, for example, has somehow managed to tie the shooting to opposition to the health-

care bill. Rep. Chellie Pingree (D., Maine) took a similar tack, noting that the bill to repeal Obamacare is called the Repeal the Job-Killing Healthcare Law Act. “I’m not suggesting that the name of that one piece of legislation somehow led to the horror of this weekend — but is it really necessary to put the word ‘killing’ in the title of a major piece of legislation?” Pingree wrote in *The Huffington Post*. Writing in *Slate*, liberal columnist Jacob Weisberg blames the killings on “anti-government” ideology, drawing a straight line from believing that some government actions are “illegitimate” to murder.

Others would go even further to stifle debate. Rep. Jim Clyburn (D., S.C.), the third-ranking Democrat in Congress, has called for reinstating the so-called “Fairness Doctrine” to muzzle talk radio. He was joined by Rep. Louise Slaughter (D., N.Y.) who wants legislation to police language on the airwaves that might “incite” violence.

Yet, if we need vigorous and uncensored debate, that debate should also be civil. In the face of silly liberal allegations linking the Arizona violence to Sarah Palin, the Tea Party, or health-care bill opponents, conservatives have seemed to recoil from any suggestion that we can have a vigorous debate without demonizing those who disagree with us. Yes, there’s more than a little hypocrisy coming from those who, like Krugman, make a cottage industry out of suggesting that conservatives are racists or that anyone who wants to reform Social Security wants grandma to starve, but that doesn’t justify all the rhetoric or actions on the right.

I believe that President Obama is deeply, profoundly mistaken in most of his policies. But that doesn’t mean that he loves this country any less than I do. The stimulus, the excessive spending, the health-care bill are bad policy, but Obama is not trying to destroy our economy, as Rush Limbaugh has suggested. Nor is the president a racist with a “deep-seated hatred of white people,” as Glenn Beck once said. (To his credit, Beck later retracted the remarks).

It is possible to be wrong without being evil.

Likewise, toleration of “birthers” and those who claim the president is a secret Muslim serves no worthwhile purpose. If we believe in the merits of our argument, let’s make it on its merits — without invective, personal attacks, or impugning the motives of our opponents.

Jared Lee Loughner, the Arizona gunman, appears to be a disturbed individual with no coherent ideology. The shooting does not seem to have anything to do with “the toxic political climate.” But that doesn’t mean that it can’t provide us all with an opportunity to consider how we conduct our debate.

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