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Mar. 23, 2010

Driving the Conversation:

Arena Ref: [Fred Barbash](#)

Political mob rule?

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One hesitates to weigh in on this mud-slinging for fear of getting muddy oneself. But neither should commentary on Republican and Tea Party reaction to Sunday's House vote be left to the suddenly self-righteous Democratic left: After all, it's their appalling disregard for democratic principles and processes that gave rise to the weekend's demonstrations and outbursts. So a few points are in order, simply to put things in perspective.

First, let's not leap to factual conclusions. Last evening the Lehrer News Hour reported (along with POLITICO Tuesday morning) that Rep. Randy Neugebauer shouted "baby killer" as Rep. Bart Stupak was speaking Sunday night. Yet NPR reported that Neugebauer actually shouted "*It's* a baby killer" -- referring to the bill, not to Stupak. Neither version is acceptable, but there is a difference. Likewise, claims about protesters taunts should be treated cautiously as well, especially since they've been denied, and as yet no footage has emerged to support them.

Yet we see here at the Arena this morning that Harvard's Theda Skocpol is writing, without a shred of evidence, that "Quite a few Republican public officials are even flirting with threats of

violence against political figures they oppose." So let's not pretend that the right has a corner on irresponsibility.

Second, even if the claims about protester's taunts prove to be true, how is that a warrant for condemning the entire Tea Party movement, or the Republican Party, as many on the left are doing? No broad political movement can control its every "member." Yet we find people like House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn saying that GOP leaders "ought to be ashamed of themselves for bringing these people here to Washington." Perhaps Rep. Clyburn has forgotten that we still have the right to protest. That's what the first tea party was about. And let's remember that George Washington had to wade into the "mob" from time to time to keep order.

And that brings me to a final point. The symbolism of the Democratic left's hostility to the "tea baggers" should not go unnoticed. The tea party movement's roots are in the American Revolution. These ordinary Americans are protesting the Washington "Establishment" - which presently is the Democratic juggernaut - much as American Patriots were protesting the oppressive British Establishment that was "eating out their substance" with "a long train of abuses and usurpations." The Democratic left should think long and hard about those parallels. The times they are a-changin.

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