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Racism & Reaction Must be Confronted
Left Margin
By Carl Bloice
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David Brooks ought to go running even more often; maybe take a different route sometimes. A couple of weeks ago the *New York Times* columnist was doing his usual Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol and back trek when he encountered a bunch of "tea party" people demonstrating and "carrying 'Don't Tread on Me' flags, 'End the Fed' placards and signs condemning big government, Barack Obama, socialist healthcare and various elite institutions." Nearby were people at a celebration of African-American culture and Brooks says he noticed "the mostly white tea party protesters were mingling in with the mostly black family reunion celebrants. The tea party people were buying lunch from the family reunion food stands. They had joined the audience of a rap concert." From this harmonious vision Brooks concluded that as far as the tea baggers are concerned "race is largely besides the point." Now get this. There are "some people" in the country, he writes, "who see every conflict through the prism of race." Who? Racists? No, it's "many people from Jimmy Carter on down" who have suggested that "the hostility to President Obama is driven by racism."

The reason I say Brooks should jog more often is that in other parts of town he might discover that in the neighborhoods of the District of Columbia most people would prefer not to see political issues through the prism of race at all; they prefer racism would just go away. But it doesn't. It keeps popping up. Compare the placards Brooks saw that

day on the Washington mall with what others saw. "At a rally in Washington a few days ago after the President announced his healthcare plans to Congress, protestors bore placards featuring slogans including 'the zoo has an African lion while the White House has a lyn' African and, 'Somewhere in Kenya, a village is missing its teleprompter'," reported the *Financial Times* last Friday. That's just sampling of the demeaning racial slurs that have been directed toward the white House over recent weeks.

"I have no patience with those who want to pretend that racism is not an out-and-out big deal in the United States, as it always has been," wrote Brooks' fellow *Times* columnist Bob Herbert last Saturday. "We may have made progress, and we may have a black president, but the scourge is still with us. And if you needed Jimmy Carter to remind you of that, then you've been wandering around with your eyes closed."

Or running.

"These are bits and pieces of an increasingly unrestrained manifestation of racism directed toward Mr. Obama that is being fed by hate-mongers on talk radio and is widely tolerated, if not encouraged, by Republican Party leaders," wrote Herbert. "It's disgusting, and it's dangerous. But it's the same old filthy racism that has been there all along and that has been exploited by the G.O.P. since the 1960s."

And here we come to the crux of the matter.

Rightwing populism is dangerous but the greatest potential peril lies not in the presence of some loony or deluded, irrational people parading through the streets. It arises from the certainty that there will always be someone lurking about in a trench coat to fan the flames for their own cynical purposes. It was true in Central Europe 70 years ago when fascism arose and it's true there today, what with agitation against immigrants and ethnic minorities. It's been true in our country for just as long.

Of course, the tea party uprising isn't just about race. It certainly isn't just about healthcare. You watch, as each and every item on the Obama Administration comes to the fore they will be out there waving their personally vindictive signs and the vituperative tenor of their attacks will increase. No sooner than the President had announced his decision to can his predecessor's mad 'star wars' missile project than he was being accused of everything short of treason. The assaults on Obama will continue to be tinged with racism and they will continue to draw out numbers of people aghast that the country elected an African American president. But it will be in context. This venom is being supported and stoked by powerful forces whose objective is nothing less than bringing down the Obama presidency. While the know-nothings are being wild in the streets, the Republican spinmaster Karl Rove is calmly assuring readers of the *Wall Street Journal* that this is all to the good and if all goes well for them, they could be back on top by the time of the 1010 Congressional elections.

"Mr. Obama is forgetting that the political landscape can change when the pool of people who vote changes," Rove wrote in the *Journal* a few days after the President's healthcare address to Congress. "In 2008, five million more people voted than in 2004. Mr. Obama drew two million more African-Americans to the polls. He also shifted support among younger voters (ages 18-24) from 54 percent, Democratic, 45 percent Republican in 2004 to 66 percent Democratic, 32 percent Republican." Rove went on to

suggest opponents of the President can siphon off some of the youth vote by convincing younger voters that under the health care plan now before the Senate they would be fined for not having health insurance. "Fining them only antagonizes them," he wrote.

Rove went on to make it clear rightwing strategists are aiming their message at older voters, "The political risk for Democrats is clearest among seniors," he wrote. "This matters because seniors make up a disproportionate share of the off-year vote," he went on "CNN exit polls showed that they were roughly 16% of eligible voters in 2008, but 29% of the turnout in 2006. The generic ballot among seniors in 1994 was 45% Republican and 43% Democrat.

But it's not just any elderly voter they are going after.

"As *The Hotline's* Amy Walter wisely pointed out, 1994 became the 'angry white male' election because those who were displeased with the direction of the country were 'more engaged than those who just two years earlier were voting for Bill Clinton and singing 'don't stop thinking about tomorrow'," wrote political commentator Charlie Cook a couple of weeks ago. "But 'angry' is only a third of 'angry white male,' and anger is only part of the story today." If recent polling numbers "are even halfway accurate, they should frighten Democrats." Cook went on. "Their surveys show voters 65 and over, who gave Democrats a 50 percent to 39 percent edge on the generic ballot in November 2006, giving Republicans a 51 percent to 43 percent edge now. If that reversal holds, Democrats could be ruining the "year of the angry white senior" at the polling place, not just the town hall."

Who said the "southern strategy" was dead?

"Last weekend's grassroots rally against ObamaCare in Washington was a sign that voters are getting active to oppose the president's agenda," declared Rove. "If it keeps up, middle-class anxiety about the national debt could make 2010 a tough year for any Democrat up for re-election."

This isn't just about Obama and it isn't just about the Republican Party's cynical electoral calculations. As one internet observer put it, "the Teabaggers are only pawns in the rich man's game." There are powerful people in this country (many of whom couldn't care less what the color the President is) who are determined to turn history back. To them the emerging progressive political forces that were to a large extent responsible for Obama's election is an anathema. The moves of the current administration – as hesitant, timid and often contradictory as they may seem to many of us – suggest a direction in which they don't want to go. On a whole host of issues, from climate change to green jobs to policy toward Latin America and beyond, they are out to return us to the policies of the Bush Presidency – or worse. To this end they are willing to exploit every social issue they can latch onto, from gay rights to taxes. And, of course, they are more than anxious to trade on the current economic crisis and the government's seeming largess to Wall Street CEOs and reluctance to get really serious about the economic precariousness of working people.

Those who have termed this rightwing upsurge "populism," are correct. "This is right-wing populism in the classic American style, as inchoate and paranoid as that

hawked by Father Coughlin during the Great Depression and George Wallace in the late 1960s," wrote the Times' Frank Rich Sunday. Even Brooks is willing to use the label.

However, Brooks, who often comes across as the learned conservative cultural anthropologist always trying to position himself in the political "center," wants us to see the Obama Administration and its supporters as elitists and the tea baggers as "plain people" arrayed against " the cosmopolitan elites." "Given all of this, it was guaranteed that he would spark a populist backlash, regardless of his skin color," he writes. "And it was guaranteed that this backlash would be ill mannered, conspiratorial and over the top — since these movements always are, whether they were led by Huey Long, Father Coughlin or anybody else." What he does not accept, apparently, is that racism has always been a central factor in populism. (It has historically also been the Achilles heel of populism on the left.) Couglin was an anti-Semite and he preached anti-Semitism. Wallace was a racist and he promoted racism. Both served the interest of others with wider agendas. Both constituted serious threats to democratic advance.

Where to from here? Stepping up efforts to secure progressive aims, like meaningful healthcare reform and an end to the war in Afghanistan is crucial to combating the right and buttressing the movement that was critical in the last Presidential election. It seems to me there must also be resolve to form a unified front against racism and reaction. Ignoring, obscuring or downplaying the threat will serve no good purpose. This is serious business.

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