The Silence of the Republicans

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Posted: September 14, 2009 05:03 AM

The Republican shenanigans during President Obama's speech to Congress last week, including, but not limited to, Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) yelling "you lie," while extraordinarily disrespectful of the presidency, the Congress, and not least the American people, follows directly from a pattern of behavior by Republican leaders or by ordinary Americans, facilitated and encouraged by the Republican Party and affiliated groups. The behavior itself should not be too surprising, the failure of almost any major Republican leaders to speak out against this behavior, may not be surprising, but is certainly noteworthy.

A clear line can be drawn from the red-baiting and Muslim-baiting of Obama during the campaign, to the birther movement, to shouting down Democratic members of Congress at town hall meetings to the accusation that the President of the United States was a Nazi because he sought to expand health care to a greater number of Americans to Joe Wilson's behavior last week. Parenthetically, it should be noted that other American presidents who have sought to expand health care coverage to more Americans include Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, two presidents whose anti-Nazi credentials are reasonably strong.

The Republicans, to their credit, have done a remarkable job of lowering the bar for what passes as acceptable political dialog in recent months. It is hard to believe that only a few months ago people were outraged that Rush Limbaugh, the blowhard in chief of the right wing of the Republican Party, suggested that he wanted to see President Obama fail. After what we have seen the last few months, Limbaugh's comments seem positively bipartisan in nature.

Opponents of President Obama would almost certainly point out, not inaccurately, that criticism of President Bush was also particularly harsh and nasty, suggesting that this all is simply part of the give and take of politics today. This idea is appealing because it makes it possible to avoid confronting just how troubling the recent behavior of the Republican Party has been. However, the suggestion of a equivalence between the anti-Bush voices from 2001-2008 and the anti-Obama voices of today is false. The primary reason for this is that the venom directed against President Bush, while strong and at times genuinely hateful, came from the far left and the most intense opponents to the war. It did not come from the leadership of the Democratic Party, nor did it have the approval, tacit or otherwise, of that leadership.

It is worth remembering that Nancy Pelosi, who is frequently portrayed by her Republican opponents as some kind of dangerous radical, was targeted by the anti-war movement because of her unwillingness to move ahead with efforts to impeach President Bush after she became speaker of the house following the Democrats' 2006 victory. Similarly, the Democratic Party did not organize people to compare Bush to Hitler, to question the legitimacy of his presidency or to shout down representatives of the administration or Republican members of congress at meetings
throughout the country. These things, to be sure, all did occur, but the Democratic Party neither organized nor supported these efforts.

This is why the Joe Wilson incident is so revealing. Wilson is not a right wing activist who might or might not be affiliated with the party. He is an elected leader of the party, who works closely, every day with other elected leaders of the party, yet he somehow thought that kind of behavior was appropriate. Similarly, other elected leaders of the party had thought it was somehow appropriate to stand quietly by as the president of the US was called a Nazi.

If anybody was so hopeful that they believed that the Republican Party leadership did not like the level of nastiness we have seen in recent months, they must now abandon that hope. It is hard to imagine that had a Democratic member of either house of Congress shouted "you lie" at President Bush during an address to congress in 2007-2008 we would have heard silence from Nancy Pelosi or Harry Reid of the kind we have heard from the Republican leadership. Importantly, while it can be argued, although probably wrongly, that the anti-Obama fervor is no worse than the anti-Bush feelings of a few years ago, it cannot be argued that the two parties have engaged in this rhetoric in the same way.

All of this raises the question of what has happened to the Republican moderates. We know that ideological moderates are few and far between in the Republican Party these days, but what about people within the party who, regardless of their ideological views, believe that there are certain lines -- calling people Nazis, shouting down elected officials, interrupting the president to call him a liar -- which should not be crossed.? The answer seems to be that even these voices either no longer exist in the Republican Party or are too frightened to step forward.