Limbaugh, Robertson and Trevino on Haiti

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: January 17, 2010 08:21 PM

Recent comments by Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson and now US Senate candidate from California Chuck Devore's communication director regarding assistance to Haiti are so hateful, misguided, myopic and, in the case or Robertson, downright strange, that they obscure the question of what they are trying to accomplish by making these comments. Robertson's comments are extraordinarily insensitive, focusing not on the suffering and desperation of the innocent victims of the Haitian people, but on a belief that the earthquake was a form of supernatural intervention as Satan himself has finally extracted his deathly fee for help in liberating Haiti from France.

Limbaugh's comments were insensitive in a different way, demonstrating a failure to think about the people suffering in the earthquake and instead making the focus of this event President Obama. In most cases, this is a successful and appropriate, if annoying, tactic, but he seems to have crossed a line given the extreme suffering of so many Haitians. Additionally, the racial element Limbaugh injected into his rant, arguing that the earthquake will help President Obama "in the both light-skinned and dark-skinned black community in this country," while not quite as strange as Robertson's comments, are at least as offensive.

Limbaugh's comments and his anger at the Obama administration for responding quickly and compassionately, something the Bush administration could not muster following Hurricane Katrina, make it seem as if Limbaugh believes the earthquake was little more than a publicity stunt dreamed up by Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod, perhaps with the intention of increasing Obama's support among African American voters.

For Limbaugh, the earthquake in Haiti was not a disaster to which compassion and assistance were the appropriate response but yet another opportunity to attack President Obama. Supporters of Limbaugh will undoubtedly point out that the anti-Bush left did not hesitate to criticize President Bush during the Katrina crisis, but this overlooks a key difference. The Bush administration, unlike that of Obama, responded to Katrina with neither speed nor efficiency. Critics of Bush were upset with how badly he responded to that disaster, Limbaugh attacked Obama because of how well he responded to the crisis in Haiti.

Josh Trevino is a far lower profile figure than either Limbaugh or Robertson, but his tweet about Haiti "(T)he best thing the int'l community can do is tend the wounded, bury the dead, and then LEAVE. That includes all UN and charity," is significant because Trevino serves as communications director, and therefore his comments may be interpreted as reflecting the views of Chuck DeVore, a Republican senate candidate from California, even though he was not speaking for DeVore in that tweet. Trevino's comments also betray an insensitivity to human suffering that is quite impressive. The timing of the comment is more troubling than the substance because while there is a useful debate to be had on the value of assistance, tweeting following a disaster may not be the best way to start this discussion. Trevino's comments, while...
insensitive, were at least relevant. Clearly development strategy for Haiti needs to be revisited in light of this earthquake, which has changed everything for that country. Trevino's recommendation is probably not the right one, and his timing and wording are atrocious, but the general question he raises is in some sense legitimate.

Limbaugh and Robertson's comments will be brief news stories providing further evidence to their many detractors that the these two are deluded, hateful and not burdened by a shred of human compassion. Predictably, there will be no consequences for either Robertson or Limbaugh. Advertisers will not make any demands on the stations that carry Limbaugh's show; nobody will treat Robertson any differently; and Republican politicians, perhaps after waiting a few weeks, will continue to seek, and value, positive words from Limbaugh. Trevino's comments will be an even briefer story attracting less attention and will not have an effect on DeVore's campaign.

There is, however, some good news. The bright side of Limbaugh and Robertson's comments is that they do not seem to be having an impact. Private donations from Americans for Haitian relief, in spite of Limbaugh's protestations that "You already give to Haitian relief -- it's called the income tax," and Robertson's implication that the earthquake was nothing more than the devil taking his due, have been substantial. Those donations are coming from the entire spectrum of American citizens, not just Obama supporting liberals and African Americans, as Limbaugh would suggest or hope. Conservative Americans, ignoring the de facto leader of their party, have been giving money, while fundamentalist Christians, inexplicably putting the teachings of Jesus over those of Pat Robertson, have been donating as well. Additionally a number of fundamentalist Christian groups such as Focus on the Family and even Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network have links for people to donate to relief for Haiti prominently on their webpage. It turns out the American people are sympathetic and want to help the victims of this earthquake, just like their president does.