The Shooting, Anti-Semitism and Blogging

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: June 11, 2009 04:58 AM

I am preparing myself for the comments to this post and am not expecting to feel good about what I read. However, I welcome this exercise in free speech and will read and think about even the most hateful comments. I would hope that all who read this post will approach it in that same spirit.

The shooting at the Holocaust Museum, and killing of Stephen Tyrone Johns yesterday is a terrible event and a reminder that words do occasionally lead to deeds. It is good to see so many progressive voices, on the Huffington Post and elsewhere, condemning this bigoted and twisted act of violence. However, much of the analysis of this incident seems to skirt a more troubling and confounding question.

That question is whether or not it is possible to reconcile our anger and disgust about this incident with the constant drumbeat not so much of anti-Israel rhetoric, but of the suggestion of, for lack of a more delicate way of saying it, a Jewish cabal driving American foreign policy, that one often finds in the comment section of this and other "progressive" websites? I recognize that this is a confrontational, not very pleasant, and perhaps even rude, question, but the point should not be ignored. You can't have it both ways, expressing righteous indignation when a white supremacist attempts to shoot visitors to the Holocaust Museum, while no longer being startled by the suggestion that the Chief of Staff to the President of the United States as well as millions of hard working, tax paying and voting Americans somehow don't have America's best interest in mind and are disloyal to their country, because of their support for Israel. Nonetheless, these suggestions are made almost daily in the comments section of this website.

The notion that one can be critical of Israeli policy without being anti-Semitic is, of course, true. Many, if not most, American Jews are critical of various aspects of Israeli policy while being far from anti-Semitic. However, the logic of this must end somewhere because too often this truism is interpreted to mean that anti-Israel sentiment can never be anti-Semitic. When it is suggested that Jews are subverting or controlling American foreign policy, putting what is good for Israel ahead of what is good for the US, or hoodwinking good Christians into supporting Israel, the criticism is no longer targeted on Israel. While one can criticize Israel without being an anti-Semite, suggestions of Jewish conspiracies or that Jews are not loyal citizens cannot so easily be made without being anti-Semitic. Historically, these have been at the core of the very definition of anti-Semitism.

It is not just criticism of Israel that is the issue here. It is the regularity with which, in these comments and elsewhere, virtually every foreign policy issue is related back to Israel and somehow the Jews are blamed. Some friends and I play a game with foreign policy blogs on the Huffington Post where we try to guess how long it will take before Israel or the Jews are mentioned. Usually this occurs by the tenth comment, regardless of the ostensible topic of the
piece in question. This is an obsession that is not healthy and goes beyond simply garden variety criticism of Israel.

Obviously the people making those comments are not going out and trying to kill Jews, but it is both a symptom and a contributing cause of a climate which facilitates, and which will very possibly continue to facilitate, violence of the sort we saw Wednesday.

This is an issue which should be of concern to all of the readers, bloggers, commenters and others who consider ourselves part of the Huffington Post community. We are all guilty of something, possibly hypocrisy, neglect or moral cowardice when we let these comments go unanswered and then loudly condemn acts of violence targeted at Jews. The connection, while not direct, is real. Those of us who call ourselves progressives have a special responsibility to speak out against bigotry in all forms, even when it starts out as being against Israel and seeps into anti-Semitism.

I must confess that I have not been a profile in moral courage on this either. I am a professor of international politics who no longer writes on foreign affairs on the Huffington Post because I got tired of reading comments, on mine and other posts, which reduced so many issues to being about the Jews. For example, I am a prominent scholar who is broadly published and quoted on Georgia, but it was only after reading the comments section of my piece on this website about the Georgia-Russia war last August that I learned that conflict too was the fault of the Jews.

Criticism of Israel, as well as any other country, should be legitimate and important parts of our political dialog. Similarly, probing the value and nature of American relationships with all foreign countries is also important. Upon this we should all be able to agree. We should also all be able to agree that attempting to murder people for the crime of visiting a museum lies outside any notion of morality. Unfortunately, history has shown us that blaming Jews and imagining cabals and conspiracies has been a bridge between these kinds of things. Today, while we in the Huffington Post community may be relieved that the shooter was a right wing white supremacist, we should ask ourselves how we would feel if the shooter was a left-wing anti-Israel fanatic and then have the integrity and honesty to recognize the future possibility and danger of that happening.