

Hypocrisy and Health Care

Toward a list of ingredients for stew

BY LOUIS BLACK

If You Say It, Then It Is True; If Repeated, It's Believed

Regularly watching cable news commentary finds me shaking my head, feeling as though I'm trapped in some giant *Alice in Wonderland* burlesque, in which rhetoric and politics are unrelated to reality. Commentators on both the left and the right now seem to view political discussion as a contact sport, void of ideas and meaning: The goal is to dominate the conversation by speed-talking, without pausing for a single breath. In this context, opinion and attitude are presented as facts.

Some Republicans have decided that the economic crisis is entirely the fault of the Obama administration. They bemoan the outrageous spending that will end up on our children's and grandchildren's tab; that this spending is aimed at economic recovery is largely ignored, referenced only when the speaker is wondering why the economy did not immediately right itself. Maintaining this indignation over

Oops!

A story in last week's issue ("Mun' Isn't Part of UT's Grand Plans") incorrectly identified UT professor David Hillis as director of the Brackenridge Field Laboratory. Hillis is chairman of the UT Faculty Council, while Larry Gilbert directs the field lab.

wasteful spending requires ignoring the fact that the previous administration was already dipping into the very same pockets. Rather than aiding the economy, however, that administration's bloated budgets were so inequitably targeted to benefit specific groups that the consequences were systemic financial failure and overall economic collapse. But to those not looking backward, the past is the past, while the present is very much only what they say it is.

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The Principled and the Partisan

To believe in a standard of conduct that is absolute is to embrace a principle. The acceptance of such means one tries faithfully to apply that principle, regardless of surrounding circumstances. To take a partisan position is to bend and shape such a code to fit differing situations as best serves one's beliefs. A "principled position" must be independent of the ideology and specifics of a situation. When the way it is considered is instead dependent on those things, then it is just partisan politics.

Freedom of speech is a critical ingredient of an open, democratic society. I'm not citing the Bill of Rights here because all the First Amendment does is guarantee that the government won't abridge speech. Nor am I going to the other extreme, wherein anyone denied access to expressing views through any medium is being censored. There is no secular, constitutional, or spiritual guarantee that one has an inalienable right to have his or her message heard.

When it comes to freedom of speech, however, all too often people defend their own rights – as well as the ones of those who are like-minded – but fail to protect vigilantly those with differing views. True defense of freedom of speech begins with defending the rights of those with whom one most violently disagrees and the speech that is the most offensive and despicable to one personally.

Right-wing pundits often attack the ACLU for being an anti-American, subversive organization, decrying the organization's aggressive defense of constitutional principles because often it is performed in support of unpopular causes or groups that are widely detested. Protecting the rights of extremists, controversial ideas, and even reprehensible individuals is not just crucial but absolutely the most important strategy for protecting all our rights. When the Nazis wanted to march in Skokie, Ill., in 1977, given the number of concentration camp survivors who lived there, my gut reaction was violent opposition. The Constitution does not serve personal emotion, however, but justice, fairness, and rationality. If, due to the taking of extreme ideological positions, the rights to assemble and to freedom of speech were disallowed, then the precedent set is too dangerous to really comprehend.

Going to court to guard the constitutional rights of supremacists and pornographers seems reprehensible and indefensible. Except it is not defending or supporting what they do; it is privileging the freedoms and rights enumerated in the Constitution to all of us – over all other considerations. Still, rather than applauding the valiant, if often morally difficult, constitutional defenses being offered, ACLU critics instead see those actions as an assault on the country and on civilization. It is hard to tell if this is from a conscious or unconscious disregard of the breadth of those very principles and the necessity to defend them, especially when at their most controversial.

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