

Danville News Column
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“Our Political Sticks and stones”
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So who this week is going to fall victim to the contagious foot-in-mouth disease? Hardly a day goes by without someone saying something stupid that lands them into trouble. Though, to be fair, given the rabid rapidity of the Blogosphere, You-Tube, Internet, it's impossible to escape without someone taking offense and lambasting you, whether the offense is real or exaggerated.

I heard a radio talk show the other day. The conversation drifted to Congressman Doug Lamborn, who was called on the carpet for referring to President Obama as a ‘Tar Baby.’ His exact quote: *“Now I don't want to even have to be associated with him. It's like touching a tar baby and you get, you get it, you know... you are stuck and you are part of the problem now and you can't get away.”*

Lamborn's critics accused him of racism, with some nasty personal insults of their own.

His defenders cried out how this is another form of GOP bashing. Yes, we all know what martyrs and victims the Republicans are these days.

Lamborn's mistake was something bigger, symptomatic of a worse problem. His error was more than sloppy speech. His sin was that he mixed up addressing the issue by maligning the person. If he had articulated more clearly that our fiscal mess was like a tar baby rather than alluding to him (our President) as a tar baby, I doubt there would have arisen the cat calls and accusations of racism. Well, maybe not. Too many folks are ever alert for a reason to be offended.

Besides, much is stage talk anyway. What they say behind the media scene might be very different. At least I hope so. We miss those days when our congressional leaders enjoyed lunch together as professional colleagues, socializing around Washington over the weekends rather than rushing home to campaign and raise loot.

Instead of leadership, they posture to the cameras. Pandering to the base. And the base can be pretty base. We do take smarmy delight in the lowest common denominator. Beware, Americans, for this is exactly the soil out of which dictators arise. Unless we reject these days of fear, division, venom, intractable partisanship, our nation could be ripe for such a horror.

Republicans and Democrats might both do well to remember their origins. Democrats arose under Jefferson in opposition to the Federalist Party by emphasizing personal liberties and limited government. Republicans emerged in 1854 as a fierce anti-slavery movement, demanding the dignity of free work for the common man, and opposing the

right of “popular sovereignty” where new US territories were free choose whether they would allow slavery or not. Funny, don’t you think?

Problem One: instead of a disinterested debate of issues, we insult persons. The politics of name-calling. Politics of vitriol. Now, having just read a book where Charles Sumner is one of the main characters, Congress today is tepid compared to Congress of the 1850’s. Sumner, seated at his desk in the Senate, was beaten with a cane into unconsciousness by a Congressman. In 1858 a fistfight brawl broke out between Northern and Southern Congressman. How refreshing compared to today’s internet assassinations!

My daddy advised that if I couldn’t say anything nice about someone, don’t say anything at all. My grandma reminded me to honor others. Even those I dislike.

Problem Two: taking it all so personally. We refuse to listen. When did we become so hyper-sensitive? Quick to judge? Defensive? If you don’t agree with me, you’re against me. The sick corollary continues: if you’re against me, you’re my enemy. We are quick to forgo nuance, texture, complexity, and align ourselves into camps of pro and con, pinheads or patriots, right thinkers and wrong thinkers, angels and demons.

Take, for instance, placards displayed on the streets of Manhattan during the recent debate about legalizing the misnomer of gay marriage. “Homophobic” the placards accused, along with much finger-pointing. Well, probably for some folks there is such fear of homosexuality, but not for most. That many argue gay unions shouldn’t be legalized, doesn’t make them hostile to homosexuals. No more than those who urge black men to reduce rampant urban illegitimacy rates are prejudiced. No more than those who applaud women who refuse to serve as second-class citizens in buses in Jerusalem are anti-Jewish. No more than those who want nationalized health deserve being called un-American.

Name-calling gives a pretty quick indication of shallow thinking and myopic self-absorption. Stop taking things personally. You’re really not that important.