



In My View: Falling prey to tyranny of sound bites

By **ALI NIZAMUDDIN**

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Jan 15, 2011 @ 12:05 AM

Recommend

Be the first of your friends to



The shooting of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and the unspeakable tragedy in Arizona can serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and introspection. It is the most recent manifestation of an underlying current that views the individual in opposition to the perceived overreach of the federal government. Certain segments of society are convinced that the greatest threat to their individual liberty comes from Big Brother. In fact, there is the "hateriot" movement, which believes that it is patriotic to hate our government. This was most visible during the health-care debate when people brought guns to political rallies to protest government spending on social programs.

Those who espouse this position believe that the market is a better allocator of scarce resources than the government, and that governments function best when they function least. This may very well be true.

But what they do not understand is that the market is a good allocator of private goods like coffee, cereal, pencils, etc. The market, however, fails when it comes to the provisioning of public goods that are beyond the purview of individual private citizens to provide. Roads, bridges, public libraries, the police and fire departments, water purification systems, food inspection, the military, community colleges, schools, street lights and courts are all provided by the government. Individual citizens neither have the resources nor the incentives to provide these goods for the welfare of others. Governments must intervene when markets fail, as is the case with health care, given that millions of Americans do not have insurance.

It is possible to have a meaningful and intelligent conversation on such issues if the general public is so inclined. However, politicians are increasingly convinced that explaining complex issues in a logical manner may be beyond the capacity of many Americans and that the best way to mobilize their base is through fear.

The public may not understand unique aspects of American foreign policy in the Middle East, but they can understand slogans like "bring it on," "either you are with us or with the terrorists" and "don't mess with Texas."

The current junior senator of Massachusetts actually ran on a platform of "My name is Scott Brown, I am from Wrentham, and I drive a truck." Imagine Thomas Jefferson speaking in this pedestrian way so as to garner the popular vote. How outrageous it would be if he had said, "My name is Thomas Jefferson but you can call me T.J., I am from Virginia, and I love chewing tobacco."

The reality is that we have become a society that clings to easy sound bites. Complex issues of national significance are reduced to a neat slogan.

The attempt to build an Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan was described as the terrorist victory mosque, the thought of levying an estate tax on inheritance became known as the death tax, the desire to provide late life counseling was pejoratively referred to as death panels, any questioning of American foreign policy is dismissed as empowering the terrorists, and the goal of providing more than 30 million Americans health care has been branded socialism.

Exacerbating the problem is the use of violent imagery by politicians. Sarah Palin put cross hairs (a rifle scope target) in several Democratic districts, including that of Giffords. She then stated "lovers of America do not retreat, instead they reload." Giffords' opponent in the recent election, Jesse Kelly, ran on the slogan, "Get on target for victory in November, help remove Gabrielle Giffords from office, and shoot a fully automatic M-16 with Jesse Kelly." And a West Virginia politician shot a bullet through a piece of legislation that he opposed.

There may be nothing to link the shooter with this odious rhetoric. We do know that Rep. Giffords' office was vandalized soon after her vote on health care, and a protester dropped a gun at an outdoor event similar to the one that she was shot at. We also know that Congresswoman Giffords was deeply concerned about the toxic climate that places a premium on inflammatory political speech.

We need to begin a conversation about the etiquette of civil discourse and the perils of demonizing others and their opinions. We should be doing this anyway, despite what happened in Arizona, so that we can preserve the American creed *e pluribus unum*, meaning "out of many, one."

The youngest casualty in Tucson was Christina Taylor Green, who was born on Sept. 11, 2001. Let us celebrate her life by not resorting to sound bites and by refusing to be stoked by fear as a Pavlovian response to the prodding of politicians.

Dr. Ali Nizamuddin is an associate professor of political science at the University of Illinois Springfield and is on the steering committee of the Coalition to Promote Human Dignity and Diversity.

Copyright 2011 The State Journal-Register. Some rights reserved