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Town hall antics seem to be propaganda

August 12, 2009 in [An Independent Attitude](#), [In This Issue](#), [Opinion](#)

It's funny how getting away for a few days can clear your head. The day-to-day challenges of running a newspaper that is both a business and an information outlet makes it hard to relax and get perspective.

But a recent road trip gave me the opportunity to express thoughts that had been lurking just below my ability to articulate. And as I thought about several issues, I came to a rather chilling conclusion.

But let me first tell you how I got to the conclusion.

A few months ago I attended an Amarillo Advertising Federation luncheon at which the speaker, Steve Stockdale, talked about how words and symbols could be used to shape public opinion. No big news there, right?



But one of the uses of words and symbols by a utility company in the Metroplex — including the hiring of a prominent local TV news anchor and using a news program-like set — was particularly distasteful because it gave the wrong impression: That the issues advocated by the utility company were an objective and evenhanded presentation of the issues. And that the utility's desire for certain government concessions was "news."

What issues or what utility company was involved doesn't matter. What matters is that Stockdale used the example to talk about Edward Louis Bernays, the father of modern public relations.

In his 1928 book, "The Business of Propaganda," Bernays wrote: "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. . . . We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of."

So, as we motored through the vast Texas countryside, I kept thinking about the national debate about health care and how the dialogue has unfolded. It struck me that the substantive issues about how to legislate health care or insurance reform didn't matter at the moment. What struck me was a quote from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure," Lincoln said.

And that is my chilling conclusion.

I think we're in another civil war, although not one that is violent — at least not yet.

The fight over health care is being waged with propaganda from both sides and right now those who are opposed to what seems to be the only viable proposed measure in the House hopper, H.R. 3200, are winning. No less a newspaper than The New York Times, in a story by Jim Rutenberg and Jackie Calmes in Monday's issue, reported that the Obama White House has lost some of the initiative. The White House has launched a Web site to battle labels that call H.R. 3200 "Obamacare" and to battle charges that the administration wants to "socialize" medicine, "ration" health services and force "euthanasia" on the elderly.

But the rhetorical battle over health care reflects a far deeper divide in American life. We are at a crossroads in which the fight really is for who rules the country — the people or those whom the people elect.

The anger at the "ruling class" at the July 4 TEA Party was clear. Oh, sure, the specific targets were taxes, "socialized medicine," term limits and gun control. But the real anger was at elected officials,

Weather in Amarillo



74°F

Partly Cloudy

especially those in Washington, who say they want to help people, to get elected, and then do anything and everything to retain their cushy lifestyles at taxpayer expense. And, that such a display of this anger in the Republican-dominated Panhandle exempted neither major party was a little surprising.

We're now seeing reports from across the country of the same kind of raucous behavior at the so-called town hall meetings various member of Congress have been holding to either explain or hear about health care reform.

Those who fault the uncivil behavior are right to the extent that it is impolite and disrupts decent dialogue. But, unfortunately, those editorials miss the point, and that is that the disruptions are most likely propaganda techniques orchestrated by men we'll never know to direct the anger of those who are easily manipulated against health care reform — any reform.

And the equally chilling conclusion is that some of the local media either accept all this without critical thinking and do nothing to balance information; or, they aid and abet the propaganda purposely.

Chilling? You bet.

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