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The United States of Intolerance
By Lawrence J. Haas

Item: While lawmakers receive threatening phone calls and their offices are vandalized in the aftermath of this week's votes on health reform, Democrats and Republicans blame one another for the mayhem.

Item: The Republican-leaning American Enterprise Institute fires David Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, for suggesting that Republicans should have worked with President Obama to improve health reform rather than unalterably oppose him.

Threats to lawmakers and Frum's firing, each of which took center stage in political circles yesterday, may appear unrelated, but they each reflect a troubling trend in American politics – rising intolerance within and between our two political parties and among grassroots activists of the right and left.

Rising intolerance does more than further diminish any chance of bipartisan cooperation on the serious domestic and foreign challenges that America faces. It also threatens the nation's social cohesion – our sense of ourselves as Americans first, partisans second – and we ignore the problem at our peril.

What's needed is for Americans in the broad middle, those disgusted by both parties, by growing partisanship and reckless rhetoric, to make their voices heard – telling their elected officials that they will no longer send them back to Washington if they encourage, or even accept, the rising intolerance.

To be sure, political partisanship, rhetorical ugliness, even violence, is as American as apple pie. We have lost presidents to assassination; Americans both white and black have died while working for civil rights; and the federal government has arrested, detained, or blacklisted those who it categorized as security risks (e.g., the Japanese during World War II, communists shortly thereafter).

Nevertheless, what had been episodic now seems systemic. Intolerance is more deeply built into our politics, pervading it at all levels, poisoning our ability to rise above the petty to focus on what's important.

Our Republican and Democratic parties used to be truly “big tents” – home to widely divergent viewpoints.

Republicans had both a strong conservative base as well as a robust, moderate Northeastern (or “Rockefeller”) wing. Democrats had both a liberal base as well as an influential band of southern conservatives.

No more. Each party is ruled by a kind of “purity patrol” of big-money donors and grassroots activists who, together, force the members of each party to adhere to party dogma or risk retribution.

Republicans are now almost devoid of moderates, having made them unwelcome. The party enforces a strict anti-tax, anti-government dogma that forced 2008 presidential nominee John McCain to disavow his prior support for fiscal responsibility and promote another round of fiscally reckless tax cuts – and that, apparently, has now claimed the thoughtful Frum as its next victim.

Similarly, Democrats have pushed away conservatives and, though they have a healthy “blue dog” contingent of moderates, they essentially excommunicated moderate Sen. Joe Lieberman over his support for President Bush’s Iraq policies, forcing him to win re-election in 2006 as an independent.

Nor, of course, is the story better between the parties.

The days when Republican President Dwight Eisenhower plotted a bipartisan agenda with Democratic House Speaker Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson in the late 1950s, or when Republican President Ronald Reagan worked with Democratic House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski on tax reform in the mid-1980s, or when Democratic President Bill Clinton worked with Republican Speaker Newt Gingrich on welfare reform and children’s health in the late 1990s seem long gone.

Nor, alas, is the story better at the grassroots.

Egged on by cable TV and talk radio, activists of the left and right portray their political opponents not as adversaries but enemies, not just wrong but evil. The Bush of the early 2000s with a Hitler-style moustache on placards, lambasted on the left as the world’s greatest “terrorist,” has been replaced by the Obama of 2010 with the same moustache, scorned as a one-world “socialist.”

Ugliness within the parties, between the parties, at the grassroots and on TV and radio reinforce one another, creating a vicious cycle of ugliness. As America’s political center turns away in disgust, the extremes of the right and left take over, pushing the envelope of acceptable rhetoric and behavior.

Not even the frightening spectacle of bullets through one lawmaker’s office, a coffin on the lawn of another and threatening phone calls to the offices of still others could shake the nation’s leaders from their partisan addictions. Not even racial epithets directed at black lawmakers and homophobic taunts of an openly gay lawmaker outside the Capitol building last weekend could bring the parties together.

Just when Democratic and Republican leaders should have joined hands, proclaimed their unity as Americans, and publicly adopted a no-tolerance policy toward the ugliness of recent days, they could not rise to the occasion.

Democrats blamed Republicans for encouraging “tea party” activists and other angry opponents of health reform. Republicans suggested that Democrats were exploiting the ugliness for political reasons.

And a political process dominated by extremes sank deeper into a bitter – indeed, a dangerous – swamp.